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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

UNDEAD ISLAND

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Illustrations by
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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

Undead Island

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VOLUME 25

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Island in a Sea of Fog

Chapter 1

I

Meg was taking a break on top of a cliff that overlooked the sea and the entire village. The thought of the chicken pot pie she'd bought in the town of Piercenun along with the heavy-duty hooks and lines made her stomach rumble. If Toma could've heard it, he'd have asked her to break up for sure. Just below the sixty-foot-high cliff lay the "god wood," and beyond that was the village. The houses on the beach she'd been looking down at for seventeen years were, to this girl with her heart full of the springtime of youth, almost frustratingly unchanged. Still, the cramped bay and tiny boats in the distance set against this backdrop of sea and sky couldn't help but make Meg's heart quiver with emotion—even if she felt like a sucker all the while.

It was a clear, cloudless day, the sunlight-studded sea truly losing its borders until it too seemed a part of the heavens. However, there was just one thing. One black point that seemed to be a sarcastic god's way of saying, *Nothing in this world is perfect.* The scene touched her heart so deeply as she sat on the cliff not because of the panoramic view but *in spite of it*, Meg thought, occasionally frightened by the workings of her own mind.

Boldly taking a seat on the edge of the cliff, Meg looked down on the sea and the sky, where a kitten-like cloud had formed, as she pulled the chicken pot pie from its tin wrapping. Clearing her throat, she turned her eyes back to the sea and sky. They were changing.

"Huh. What's that?" she said somewhat fearfully, yet she still managed to bite into her lunch, as she was still a growing girl. As she chewed in mute amazement, something from the distant horizon came swiftly creeping toward the beach. The azure and ultramarine that filled Meg's field of view were becoming a different hue. The white of fog.

Meg wrapped her arms around herself. A trembling was rising from the very marrow of her bones. And she believed it wouldn't stop until the fog had cleared again. She knew the reason.

"It's coming from the island."

Meg didn't say anything more. It was too dreadful to put into words. But in her head, like the applause that followed the climax of a play by the regional thespians, a number of words were already running around. *It's from Undead Island.*

“In the old days, we got the fog a lot,” a pale-faced man said in a tone so strained the words seemed to have been extracted by torture. He was very old, with white hair and a hoary beard. Though he was stooped over and needed a metal cane to walk, his eyes had a gleam that said he burned with a vitality all his years couldn’t hide. Perhaps it was fueled by fear.

The old man was at the west end of a stone embankment that enclosed the narrow bay, and behind him close to ten more people stood in the light of the sun. From the badges on their chests it was clear that three of them were the sheriff and his deputies, and of the others behind them, one was a girl who from the looks of her garb was either from this village or another nearby. The rest were men who, even as they beheld this scene like a paean to the life-giving powers of sun and water, had a lingering and ill-suited air of blood and murderous thoughts about them. Any Frontier resident over the age of three could immediately tell what they were. Bounty hunters.

“The men of this village were called ‘wave braves.’ It means they’re people of courage who don’t fear the sea.” The pale old man’s faltering voice had a mysterious power that couldn’t be attributed to failing memory as it flowed through the group. “The seas might be rough, whirlpools churning or lightning splitting the sky, but these are men who’d think nothing about heading out in a battered old boat if need be. But that fog—the fog from the island—made men like that bolt the doors to their houses, put out the lights, and hold their breath. The fog from Undead Island—even now, nobody rightly knows what it is.”

“Okay, that’s enough of the ‘nobody knows’ foreplay,” said a tough and determined man that anyone would’ve taken at a glance as the leader of the badge-wearing contingent. Once the old man’s story broke off, the lawman left some breathing room before he said to him, “We’ve put up with that all the way here from your house. Now spill it. Back in the day, what happened when the fog came rolling in? You said it wasn’t like the situation we’ve got now. So how was it then?”

A sort of tension sprang up around the old man. Invisible to the eye, it was the concentrated attention of the girl and the quartet of bounty hunters.

“Every time the fog showed up, everyone turned into Nobles.”

The girl alone gasped, while the battle-hardened men showed no change at all. Rumors about Undead Island had spread quite far across the Frontier. Turned into Nobles—the horrifying import of those words was clear to the old-timer as he said that. Fog pressed in from the sea one night to turn everything milky white, a few villagers got pairs of raw, swollen teeth marks on the nape of their necks, and then they in turn sought the blood of their family and neighbors.

“In the seventy-two years I spent in the village,” the old man continued, “the fog hit us three times. And every time, a couple of people would go after their families for blood, and they and all those they bit got stakes through their hearts. And the only reason we managed to slay the predators in fog so thick we could barely see our hands in front of our own faces is because, aside from the first few people turned into Nobles, those drained of blood only became Nobility the night after they joined the dead, and the fog’s incursion ended quickly enough. When we got the second wave of it, five folks total turned into Nobles first. Four of them were put down soon as the fog cleared, but the last one escaped into the sea.”

On hearing that, the sheriff was just about to shout, “Hold it right there!” However, it was actually one of the bounty hunters who spoke up, a giant of a man even more powerfully built than the sheriff and as hirsute as the old man—only in his case the whiskers were jet black. His name was Garigon.

“Hold it right there, Mister Former Mayor. Freshwater or salt, I thought Nobles and those they’ve turned weren’t supposed to be able to cross running water.”

“Me and the four villagers I was with all saw the man swimming out to sea by the light of the moon. Ever since, we haven’t put any stock in the legends about running water.”

“So, did that fella head off to Undead Island?”

“I don’t know. No one was about to follow him.”

“And did the fog really come from the island?”

The old man nodded. “Back before I was even born, and I’m talking more than a hundred years ago, there was a bunch of villagers who went out to the island to see if maybe folks could live there. Their report was pretty surprising. When they came back, they said that setting aside the facilities left by the Nobility, Undead Island could be called a paradise on earth, filled with plants and animals, the sea around it a treasure trove of fish and shellfish, and with all the fowl you’d care to shoot. But what whipped the village up more than anything was the way they said soil out on the island was real well suited to farming. As you can see, mountains border the village on three sides, so they’ve only fishing to rely on for their daily bread. Now the men might’ve been too proud, but the women they left tending the homes wanted a life of working the unshaking soil instead of an existence on a sea that’ll turn wild at the drop of a hat. Less than two weeks after the survey party came back, seven families from the village—thirty people, all told—decided to cross the sea and take up permanent residence on the island.”

“On Undead Island?” one of the sheriff’s deputies murmured. Although the head lawman and his two underlings wore standard-

issue gun belts, the hands poised to reach for their weapons all trembled faintly.

In contrast to that, the bounty hunters actually seemed to be enjoying the old man's tale, and the youngest of them—a boy who still looked to be in his late teens—was twanging the short bow he had under his left arm as he said, "I never heard this story before. Now things are getting interesting. You know, I've heard a lot of talk about Undead Island, but it's always kinda fuzzy on the details. Is there really one of the Nobility's spaceports out there on the island?"

"There's something like that. Only it seems not a single soul from the survey party or the settlers who came later ever set foot inside it. All there ever was on that facility were reports about the outward appearances. Based on those, it seems it wasn't a spaceport. But then with the Nobility, you never can tell."

"Hmm. Back then the fog didn't roll in, I take it."

If it had, and the results had been similar to the present situation, there probably wouldn't have been any talk of establishing a settlement.

The old person confirmed this with a nod, saying, "Not that I've heard."

"What happened to all those settlers, then? Did they pull up stakes and come back?"

It took a while for the old man to respond.

"They're still out on the island."

"Meaning what—they got wiped out?" asked the third bounty hunter. In his right hand he gripped an eighteen-inch short spear.

The old man shook his head. Two expressions occupied the deeply wrinkled face weathered by wave and wind and sun. Fear and a smile.

"Seems they're not dead," he said.

"What do you mean by that?" This question came from Garigon's lips.

"You see, the first time the fog hit, one of the Nobles who attacked the village had been part of that group of settlers."

II

When the old man said "Noble," he wasn't talking about their station. This was a term of derision cast on all their ilk—including humans who'd been turned into bloodsuckers. What the old man was telling them was that the Noble who attacked the desolate little fishing village under cover of fog that first time was a *former* villager.

"That place's been called Undead Island since long, long before the village was built. But we didn't really feel it in our hearts until that second down on the beach when the fog cleared and flames from our

torches showed us the face of one of our own. See, that first fog had come exactly a day after we lost regular communication with the settlers."

"Had the Nobility risen again?" the fourth bounty hunter inquired, his lips seeming to curl in amusement. White teeth gleamed in a suntanned face. A repeating rifle was slung over his shoulder.

"That's all we could think of. The day after that first fog, the village banned all passage over to the island. Just the same, a number of folks with blood ties to the settlers broke the ban and sailed out, but not one of them ever came back."

Only those unfamiliar with the Frontier and the Nobility would be foolish enough to label that travel ban cruel. Even now, with the Nobility in extreme decline, the fear of them remained a deep black stain on the brains of the populace.

"But why did the Nobility come back all of a sudden?"

Garigon's query might've been directed at himself, yet the rest of them unconsciously focused their gaze on the old man once more.

"No way to know that without crossing over to the island," the former mayor said, his reply carrying a terrible resignation and weariness.

Even these rough men who'd left mountains of corpses and spilled rivers of blood were momentarily left speechless.

After that brutal silence, the sheriff finally said, "That's why we're here. Could we trouble you to set us up with a boat?"

The old man shook his head from side to side.

"Boats are a fisherman's life. I can't let somebody else just take one out. Not even if the owner's gone now."

The lawman was at a loss.

"Supposing you were to take one out," the old man continued, "the area around Undead Island's still notorious for all the accidents where you get these three different currents colliding. I've been putting out to sea since I was all of three, and my father and his father both warned me about getting anywhere near there. Truth is, I nearly died out there twice. No way on earth you can do it without somebody from the village along."

"We were hoping you could help us out there. Yesterday, as soon as Meg here notified me and we had confirmation of the situation in the village, I immediately got in touch with anyone in the nearby towns or villages who hails from this village. No one but you would even hear me out. Now, I realize coming out here wasn't easy for you. Chalk it up to shit luck if you must, but give us a little help here."

"You're talking to a man who turned his back on this village. After forty years serving as mayor, all of sudden I couldn't take any of it anymore. Not living in poverty, not the raging sea, not a miserable

little village that only survived by the grace of God. Sheriff, you think anybody'd be happy with a man who ran off and abandoned his own family dragging his sorry ass back here and letting other folks use their boats? For starters, I won't allow myself to do it!"

Though the old man's tone was one of complete exhaustion, it was underpinned with a will of iron.

"Damn, but this is the strangest thing," Garigon said, twisting his body around so he could look back at the village behind them. "More than a hundred villagers, from little babies up to grannies and grandpappies, all disappearing in a single night."

Everyone had already turned in the same direction. Before them, houses of wood and plastic sat in unsettling stillness in the midday sun. Two days earlier, fog had crossed the sea in the afternoon, and apparently someone within it had taken everyone away. When the sheriff and others raced there the next morning, they found not a single soul—a village so dead, in fact, there was no sign of so much as a dog or cat.

"Meg," the sheriff called out, and the girl turned to face him. "I know we've been over this time and again, but is that really what you saw—every last person from the village walking out to sea on top of the water, headed out to Undead Island?"

The lawman had a stern look in his eye that told her he wouldn't hear any lies, and the girl nodded to him, but just then a dazed look surfaced on her face. Ever since witnessing the coming of the fog she'd done her level best not to let fear get the better of her, but the threads of willpower steadying her had suddenly been snipped, throwing them into disarray. The change was so great the sheriff himself twisted around for a look to the left—staring off at the cliffs towering over the other end of the bay some fifty yards distant. What Meg saw should've been there. But there was no one. And none of the others seemed to have seen it. However, when Meg took another look, all she could think was that some sort of incredible being had been there. Something that could raise her fear-fraught psyche in rapture.

"I saw," Meg said, nodding absent-mindedly. The reply seemed to come from a husk robbed not only of its mind but of its very soul. "I saw a really gorgeous man."

Meg had left the town of Piercenun about noon and run into the sheriff's office all pale-faced that same evening. A one-way trip between Meg's village and the town of Piercenun would take a girl like her an hour and a half on foot. Apparently the girl had run the whole way, and according to her wheezing, breathless tale—

Tearing down the stone steps from the cliff toward the fog-shrouded village, Meg headed toward her house without the slightest hesitation. Though she was well acquainted with the strange and

terrible occurrences connected to the fog, that only helped her concern for her family and the desire to save them claw their way to the surface.

The village was already choked with thick white fog, but Meg managed to discern the shadowy forms of houses a few yards ahead of her. Relying seventy percent on her eyesight and the other thirty on instinct, she headed for the center of the village—a grocery store called Gass's Place that was fifty or sixty feet from the bay. But when the girl got there, the door was open.

"Huh?" she said, the word escaping her in surprise.

The ironclad rule was that when fog came in from the sea, you shut your doors and didn't open them even if it were your own family outside.

Standing in front of the shop was the proprietor, Gass Kemp. And it wasn't just him. His wife, son, both daughters, and even his bedridden grandmother all appeared, one after another, lining up right beside him. Meg got the feeling there was some invisible drill instructor right by them.

The grocer and his family quickly set out on foot toward the bay. Following them with her eyes, Meg was rooted in place. Something black took hazy shape in the depths of the fog, and by the time she realized it was made up of people they'd closed to within a few yards. Meg was so scared she was ready to shut her eyes, but they passed right in front of her as they walked toward the bay, just as Gass and his family had done.

"Auntie Mabel . . ." the girl murmured.

Passing by was an old woman who lived alone now that all her kin were dead, and the community looked after her.

"The Kapsch family . . ."

The father, Nodd, was at the fore, leading a quintet of the village's most accomplished fishermen.

"Mr. Ulmer . . ."

He was the most important person in the village—their shipwright, who would be ninety this year.

"Miriam Hardy . . ."

A month ago the young blonde had been widowed when she lost her husband in a storm, but they said she'd be married again inside of a month. Every bachelor in town had his sights set on her.

All of them were walking toward the bay. Meg stood stock-still, unable to do anything, but not one of them turned so much as a vacant eye in her direction.

"What's going on? Is something waiting for them there? Is this what happened to the people long ago?"

Meg took a deep breath. She'd finally remembered her family.

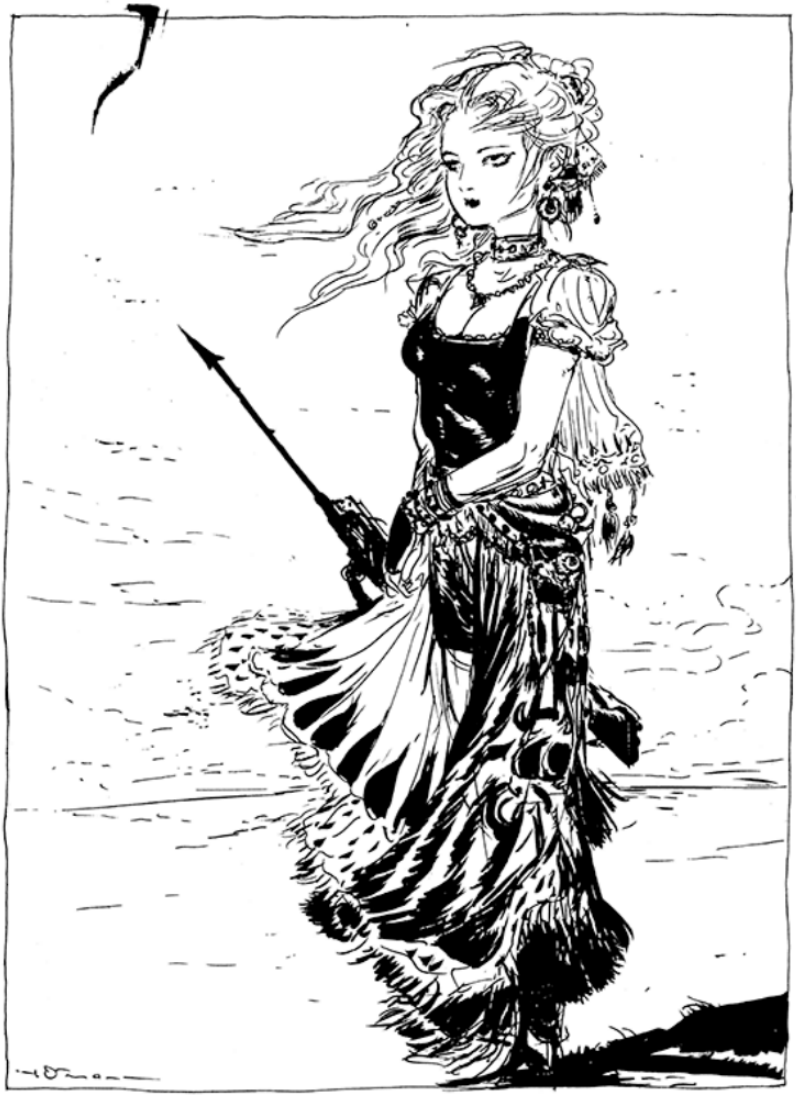
“Dad? Mom? Ida?!”

She ran like a woman possessed. It was a minor miracle that she didn’t get lost or trip even once. There was no saying how many people she passed. The only thing that was clear was that everyone in the village was headed in the same direction.

The village was built on stony terraces like the rice fields of mountainous Asia, with the bottommost tier reaching down to the beach. The houses were connected to one another by stone steps. Meg’s house was on the third tier. She crept into the place, but quickly realized nobody was there. Still, she couldn’t help running through each and every room.

When Meg left the house, she was crying in spite of herself. All she had to rely on was the spear gun she carried—one belonging to her father. Though it was the spring-powered type, it was quite powerful, with just as much force as the gas-propelled ones rich people used. Come what may, the girl was going to bring her family back—that determination burned like a fire in her, though she felt like someone was whispering to her that it was no use.

Three minutes of running down cobblestone streets brought the girl to the bay. She pushed her way through the fog, which was still clinging to her when she arrived, at which point she murmured, “I’m too late.”



There was no sign of anyone.

Meg climbed up on the breakwater and ran. Going all the way down to the end, she peered out to sea. Shadowy figures melted into view. Beyond the bay was no shallow shoal. It was more than thirty feet deep out there. Yet the figures were walking across the surface. Meg could only watch in astonishment as they went, and in less than two seconds' time they'd vanished.

And then—with a feeling like the fog surrounding her suddenly carried a chill that reached down to the marrow of her bones, Meg forgot herself, dashing down the road that led from the village to the highway.

On receiving notification, the sheriff immediately had two of his three deputies speed to the village, and as the messenger pigeon they dispatched reported that the place remained shrouded in fog, they were ordered not to enter the village. The lawman had then fallen into serious meditation. For he was not without considerable knowledge about the fog that struck from the sea. Though he possessed the skepticism that came with his line of work, the sheriff believed everything Meg had told him. He was certain the villagers had walked off across the sea. And he was equally certain of their destination. Based on that conviction, it probably took him less than a minute to decide his next course of action, because he'd known that someday this would come to pass and had given the response to the situation consideration on more than one occasion. They were thoughts that'd soon faded from his mind, but now that speculation had become reality, the sheriff was quite proud of himself for not being taken by surprise.

His plans were predicated on first crossing over to the island. To do that, they'd need a good number of people. And since something weird was going on with the island, amateurs like the townsfolk and fishermen were excluded from the fight. Because the Nobility were undoubtedly involved.

The sheriff ordered his remaining deputy to go around town and talk to all the roughest customers, he had signs put up guaranteeing a flat wage of ten thousand dalas, and he ran the emergency siren before sending out messenger pigeons with the same information to be disseminated to every town and village within a day's ride. That night nearly a hundred confident souls had called on his office, but on hearing the details they turned right around, one after another, until only four remained the following morning. Now they stood shoulder to shoulder with the sheriff on the breakwater.

As far as the sheriff was concerned, the one saving grace was that the former mayor of Meg's village had left there, and for the past year he'd been living with a daughter who'd married into a family in

Piercenun. At the sheriff's request the old man had straightened up his troubled back and clambered onto a cyborg horse.

"Well, this is a fine hole in our plans. We got nobody to take the helm!"

Garigon's complaint was greeted by silence. So long as the former mayor objected, these warriors couldn't cross over to the field of battle.

It was the youngest of the bounty hunters who shattered the oppressive air, saying, "Leave it to me. I was born in a fishing town. My rowing ain't half bad!"

"How old are you?" asked the former mayor.

"Huh? How old do I look?"

"And how old were you when you left your hometown?"

"Let's see—seven."

"You been across the brine since?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't give the helm to a seven-year-old. Just accept it."

"So, what the hell are we supposed to do, then?"

The sound of waves was the only answer to the agitated boy's query.

The solution came from a most unexpected source.

"I'll do it," said the girl.

III

"Hey! No freaking way!"

"You should've said that before we left."

While Meg was at the stern expertly working the rudder, the young deputy had a strange look in his eye as he stared at her arms, to say nothing of the waist and legs that supported her and seemed several times stronger than they'd appeared on dry land.

At any rate, with the half-dozen men also aboard, the small craft was nimbly cutting across the waves, at times with the current and at others against it. If it were a person, you'd say it had a nice, steady gait.

Stunned by the girl's ridiculous proposal, the sheriff had asked if she could even row, to which Meg replied she'd been putting to sea and helping her father with his fishing since the age of seven. Even now she was confident she was better than boys her age. The sheriff had shaken his head and said no to taking a woman along, but Garigon had suggested they could send her back as soon as they reached the island. Meg was the very first to support him. Just to be clear on the matter, the lawman asked her if she swore to do it, and naturally the girl replied in the affirmative. In truth, she had no

intention whatsoever of going back. Her parents and her little sister had gone off to an island where the Nobility roamed, after all.

In addition to the men, the boat was packed with food and water enough for two days and medicine, and two hours later the small craft headed out into the bay with the water almost up to its gunwales. The elderly deputy who'd been left behind to carry word back to Piercenun soon faded from view.

When the mainland vanished an hour out, even the sheriff thought anxiously that these currents were incredible. The boat was borne on a current reaching speeds of twenty knots. And a girl of seventeen was not only challenging that current, she was mastering it. It was small wonder that the young deputy couldn't help but let his honest impression slip out.

"We'll be there in another thirty minutes," said the girl. "Your weapons and head good to go?"

"More or less," a youthful face replied with a sigh, giving Meg a long look and a smile.

The reason she'd asked was because she was thinking to herself, *Will this kid be able to hold his own on an island with Nobles?*

"I'm Meg. And you are?"

No sooner had she asked that than the sheriff, standing at the prow, called out, "Wesley! We're within sight of the island. Don't forget to prep for our landing, now."

"Yes, sir."

"Wesley."

Once again his name had been called. This time it was Meg.

"You look a lot like the sheriff," she continued. "Is he by any chance—"

"My father," he said, nearly spitting the words.

"Oh, really. So, you're following in your dad's footsteps? Aren't you the dutiful son."

"I'm not a deputy by choice. See, he was shorthanded." There was no hostility in Wesley's answer because Meg's tone had been entirely sincere. Getting up, he turned his gaze forward to find a little hump of an island on the horizon. "Undead Island?"

The fear and horror the boy's voice carried made Meg tense up. Soon they'd be dealing with the Nobility, those who'd once been their victims, or their descendants.

Just then, the youngest bounty hunter deftly made his way across the rocking boat to the pair. Making no attempt to hide his vulgar smirk he said, "My, aren't the two of you chummy. Can I be your friend, too?" He couldn't have been any older than Wesley.

"Not a chance," Meg said flatly.

"Oh, why not?" he asked with feigned ignorance, but his eyes

shone with a dangerous gleam.

"Because ever since you got to the village you haven't taken your eyes off my boobs and butt. You're such a pig."

As Meg had reprimanded him loudly and without a hint of restraint, the bounty hunters in the middle of the craft let out delighted whoops. The young man's face flushed crimson and murderous intent filled him from head to toe. For those who lived on the field of battle, a public tongue-lashing could be considered the greatest insult. If they couldn't reassert their honor right there and then, they'd have no leg to stand on the next day. Meg was well aware of that but had been merciless with him nonetheless because he'd had such a lecherous look in his eye. However, the instant Meg saw the young bounty hunter's hand go for the machete on his hip her expression froze. It was no exaggeration to say a killing lust radiated from the young man.

"Knock it off!" Wesley said, standing between the two of them.

"You wanna try stopping me, lover boy?" said the young bounty hunter. "Don't kid yourself. You act like you've never heard of Bo the Bowman before."

That knocked the wind out of Meg. She'd had her suspicions since she first saw his bow, but never would've imagined he was really that young.

They said he could fire an arrow that would punch through a demon bird soaring a thousand yards off the ground, and he was so quick that in a second he'd taken down ten bandits, putting an arrow through the right eye of each. At a range of a hundred yards he'd taken on a hundred charging outlaws mad for blood, slaying the last with just three feet to go and ensuring that his consummate skill was already the stuff of legend. Meg got the impression Wesley and the badge on his chest were swiftly fading away like mist.

But then the girl heard someone say, "Never heard of you." That was Wesley's reply. The young deputy's right hand was going for the pistol on his hip.

"Nice. Fight! Fight!" the bounty hunter nearest the three of them chanted, pounding the butt of his short spear against the bottom of the boat and getting to his feet. "A bounty hunter and a lawman fighting over a gal? This won't be done till we've seen some blood."

"Neither of you better pull out," Garigon added. He was licking his chops.

From the look in their eyes, Wesley didn't have a prayer of winning. Knowing that, he still held his ground due to the inherent hatred of wrongdoers shared by those on the side of the law.

"Shut your trap!" the bowman snarled. The naked malice in his tone showed he'd played right into his compatriots' hands.

“Wesley! Bo! Settle down, both of you,” the sheriff commanded from the prow. “This seem like any time to be fighting among ourselves? Bo, anything happens to my deputy and you won’t see a lousy dala!”

There was no reply. The young man called Bo was so lathered up for a fight there’d be no stopping him now.

The sheriff’s right hand went for his gun—and at the same time, the two bounty hunters gripped their weapons as well. A fight between the young bucks was turning into a proxy war splitting them along job and character lines. It could no longer be averted. Both the sheriff and Meg felt it.

“Huh?!”

A cry of surprise had escaped the sheriff. It was a heartbeat later that not only his form but the entire boat was engulfed by something white billowing up from behind them.

“It’s fog!” Garigon exclaimed, his voice quavering violently.

The sea had suddenly gone mad. Waves bared white fangs and slammed the boat broadside.

“This is some serious shit! Hey! Do something, helmsman!”

“This can’t be,” Meg said, squeezing the words out in what was nearly a scream. “The tides don’t just go nuts like this. No way! It’s been rough, but we’ve managed to get this far because they were running the same as always.”

“Hold on tight, everyone! Fall in the sea and you’re a goner!” the sheriff shouted, his voice, too, shaking badly.

“What the hell is this? The wind ain’t even blowing!”

“And the sun’s shining away like nobody’s business. This ain’t normal stormy weather!”

The seas had erupted madly despite sunny skies and a lack of wind. Swells were reaching ten feet now, and if the fifteen-foot-long craft couldn’t adjust to the changed conditions, it was only a matter of time before it’d be reduced to so much flotsam.

Though she’d experienced rough seas more times than she could count, now waves rose on all sides of the boat, falling on it with the force of some bizarre beast and leaving Meg slumped over the rudder and barely conscious.

The sheriff and the roughnecks could no longer even find voice enough to shout at her. But it didn’t take long for all that to give way to cries of astonishment and delight.

“The fog’s gone!”

“The waves have settled down, too. It’s calm!”

As she felt the pitching and rolling quickly fade, Meg turned her face forward from where she clung to the rudder. Already calmed, the surface glittered in the sunlight, while far off across the water the

shape of a tiny boat became visible.

"What's that?"

As proof that Meg hadn't been the only one to spot it, someone to the fore called out, "It's a boat! One a lot smaller than ours. So how's it going so fast?"

"Manning the helm is—just one person. Some guy in black."

Meg strained her eyes for all she was worth. *It's him,* she thought. *It has to be that gorgeous fella I saw up on the cliffs.* However, when her eyes finally focused on the point in question, the little boat and the figure were rapidly pulling away, and they swiftly melted into the vast expanse of sea.

"I don't believe it. When I spotted him, it was that small. To get that far in less than five minutes . . ."

The sheriff's words sounded like delirium, and in her heart of hearts Meg was shaking her head vehemently. *You say you don't believe it, but that's a lie,* she thought. *He of all people could do it. I mean, just look at how beautiful he is.*

But a voice cut into the girl's rapturous thoughts like the teeth of a beast.

"In that boat just now—was that another bounty hunter?"

"If it is, he's a hell of a good one! Hey, hurry it up, baby. Don't want him getting the jump on us."

"But to be able to work a rudder like that . . . Who the hell is he?"

Seemingly unconcerned with the voices that rose like bubbles to the surface, the sheriff was concentrating on a different question. Those sudden killer waves just now—had they been calmed by the master of the now-vanished boat?

He had no reason to think that. No, actually there was one. Though it was at a great distance and only for a second, the sheriff had seen the face of the man helming the little boat. Not only were his features indistinct, but his very outline had been a blur. Still, the lawman's retinas had been emblazoned with it. That one God-granted instant had been like an eternity. And in it, he had been witness to beauty itself.

Wanderers

chapter 2

I

It was thirty minutes later that the boat entered a bay much larger than the one back at the village. The air grew milky white and hazy, and the way they drifted along in an almost imperceptible breeze called to mind the stillness of a tomb.

On seeing the orderly rows of bizarre midsized ships on the other side of the bay, Garigon asked Meg, “Would those happen to be the Nobility’s boats?”

“Yup. Seems they’ve been anchored there for more than a thousand years.”

Since it wasn’t the sheriff who’d posed the question, Meg’s reply wasn’t overly polite.

“They’re clean as a whistle. I heard they never ever rust, but the way they look like they just pulled up gives me the creeps.”

Meg wanted to say, “Good!” and stick her tongue out at him. As the daughter of a hardworking fisherman, she viewed bounty hunters as right at the top of the list of people to be spit upon.

“But with all their science, the Nobility would’ve been able to use aircraft to come and go to the island,” the bounty hunter continued. “I’d heard stories about them using boats, and now it looks like they were right.”

The Nobility had an intrinsic fear of water—running water in particular. In light of that, the fact that they’d built a facility out at sea on an isolated island and used ships to cross the waves to it was more than just strange; it bordered on the miraculous.

Catching glimpses of enormous docks and cranes off in the distance, as well as fantastic machinery for purposes they could hardly imagine, the group reached land. The faint fog that hung there hid the true nature of this world from their eyes.

When he saw what their final addition, Meg, was doing, the sheriff said with a stern expression, “You remember that promise you made, right? I won’t have you going ashore. Take the boat back to the village.”

“My folks and my little sister are here. Just let me be. I won’t be any trouble.”

“I hate to have to say this, but if something were to happen to the three of them, you’d be all that’s left of your family. I can’t let you do

anything dangerous. You're going back."

"No way. I can't face the coming night worrying about if the three of 'em are safe or not. Take me with you, Sheriff."

"Can't do it."

"Then I'll go anyway. Isn't it safer for you if the boat's still here?"

"Damn straight," Bo concurred. "What say we bring her along, Sheriff? Only no one's gonna be looking out for her. If she dies, it'll be all on her."

"Yeah. Out in a desolate place like this, having a girl along will make us wanna get it done a lot more than if it were just a bunch of guys."

That remark came from Garigon as he looked all around him.

But the sheriff was only looking out for Meg. "No dice," he said. "Meg, a promise is a promise. Head back to the village right away."

"No way."

"Then you leave me no choice. Wesley, bring Meg back. And then __"

The sheriff's words were sucked into the air, vanishing.

A buzz—and tension—shot through the group. The faint fog clinging to them had suddenly increased in density.

"This is bad. Everyone, stay close," the sheriff ordered. "Meg, hurry up and get in the boat."

"No," the girl said, having already squatted down, drawn a female-sized harpoon from the case she'd been wearing diagonally across her back since she got out of the boat, and poised to hurl the weapon.

"No sign of anything," Garigon said. They could still make out the outlines of everyone.

Bo replied, "I know. I'll try firing off an arrow. If anything weird's creeping up on us, that's sure to get a response."

Not waiting for a reply, he raised the short bow that already had an arrow nocked. The bowstring twanged. However, his bow was aimed up at the sky. How was that supposed to deal with a threat that might lurk on the ground?

The answer came as a red rain. At a height of about thirty feet the arrow had split in four directions. And that'd released the liquid sealed inside. There was a breeze, though it was faint. The crimson liquid was caught in the breeze, misting the group before moving on to the far end of the bay—and gusting into the expanse of trees that stood behind the buildings.

"It's blood!" the spear-wielding bounty hunter cried after seeing what clung to his fingers.

"What the hell are you doing? Are you trying to bring every damn Noble down on us?!"

Wesley's roar got only a laugh in return from Bo. "Sheesh. That

way'd save us a lot of trouble, after all. Let 'em all come at once." He already had three arrows clutched between his fingers and a fresh one nocked in the bow he had aimed at the ground, ready for offensive or defensive action.

"What the hell are you doing, asshole?!" Wesley continued to shout, but the sheriff's hand clamped down on his shoulder.

"Pipe down."

"Huh?"

The young deputy fell silent, realizing that he was the only one that'd still been talking. His ears rang with an odd sound. At first he took it for the snarling of a small animal. No, that wasn't right. It was human. Human groans. Or humans groaning like animals.

Garigon's lips twisted into a sneer. "Pretty crazy, right? The forest is full of 'em!"

No one answered him. They were too focused on the voices issuing from the forest. Now groans rose from the entire forest, enveloping the landing party like a miasma.

"They're hungry," the spear-wielding bounty hunter remarked, licking his lips. There was something vulgar about his tone that made it seem like he might as well be talking about himself, but no one corrected him.

"What the—?"

It wasn't clear who'd made that remark. Most likely it'd come from someone who'd spotted something shooting up from the treetops in that milky-white world. Much whiter than the fog, they were threads so fine that the more someone tried to focus on them, the more difficult they became to see. And hundreds if not thousands of them fell like a white rain.

It was the sheriff who shouted, "Run for it!"

The bounty hunters had scattered before he'd even given the word. Garigon and Bo dove into the water. In an unbelievable display of speed, the spear-wielder and rifleman dashed into a nearby building.

It was Wesley who grabbed Meg—frozen in her tracks—and got her back into the little boat that'd brought them there. No sooner had they pulled one of the thermal blankets on board over their heads than a white thread zipped right past them and a cry of surprise rang out.

"Pa?!" Wesley shouted, about to leap out from under the blanket.

"Stay right where you are!" he heard the sheriff cry. He was out in the white rain—or rather, wriggling in a net. White threads clung to his face, his shoulders, his hands and feet, and more stuck to him with every move he made until he was encased in a white cocoon.

"Pa?!"

Wesley was about to dash over to the lawman, but Meg clung to

his waist for all she was worth.

"Let me go!"

"No. You'll just end up like your father! You think that's what he wants?!"

Wesley became flustered. "But—Pa?!"

No sooner had the deputy put his strength into his arms to throw off the blanket than a weird sound traveled through the air. The net of threads wound about the sheriff's body had suddenly drawn tight. It was the sound of his bones breaking.

As the two of them stared speechless, the white cocoon was squeezed down to half its former size before their very eyes, rose into the air like a fish on a line, and was yanked off into the stand of trees where the threads had originated.

Meg could feel the young lawman trying to move in her arms, but she fought him desperately. The enemy was waiting for more prey to present itself. What's more, just look. Weren't there more white threads again drifting lightly up from the stand of trees, sketching white lines against the blue of the heavens as they drifted back down?

We can't get out of here. We'll just end up getting wrapped up like the sheriff sooner or later!

Fear froze Meg's heart solid.

"At this rate, we won't be able to move forward at all; we'll just be left here to—"

The instant the girl put her despair into words, the rain of threads grew chaotic. The arcs they should've followed became weaker in midflight, and they fell, drooping from leaves and branches. The master of those threads had met with some sudden emergency.

Once the rain of threads had ended completely, the pair came out from under the blanket. Some threads clung to the blanket or the deck of the boat, so it took considerable time and effort to get through them, but on the other hand, picking a path across the open spaces on the now-white ground seemed impossible.

"As long as those threads stay sticky, we ain't going nowhere," someone shouted over from the building where the bounty hunters with the spear and the rifle had taken cover. "No way of knowing how long that'll take. What's our play?"

Wesley fell silent.

Though whatever was discharging the threads had settled down, if they weren't careful how they moved they'd still find themselves snared. If the master of the threads or some other monster were to then come along, that would be the end of them.

"I've got a great way!"

The proposed solution had come from the water's surface. As the group watched, Garigon crawled out of the sea and touched the

rockface. Mixing with the water that dripped from the man's body, the threads dropped off it.

"You follow? These damn threads lose their stickiness when they come in contact with water. So, what do you say to spreading some water on them? Better yet, it'd be a lot faster for the lot of you to dunk yourselves like we did."

They all elected to do the latter. Wesley was the first to jump in.

On emerging dripping wet, he announced, "I'm going into the forest to see whether the sheriff is okay or not. The rest of you, wait here."

No one voiced any objection to that. With the sheriff gone, who'd bother going with the likes of a young deputy? In fact, the entire group seemed wholly inclined to follow his directive. They kept their silence because Wesley was free to leap into the jaws of death for all they cared.

"Sure, we'll just wait here patiently. Be sure to watch yourself out there, now," Bo said to him with mock sincerity.

"Wait," Meg called out, stopping the deputy. "It's dangerous to go it alone. One of you guys go with him."

The girl's doleful tone drew no reaction. Meg quickly abandoned that tack. She'd heard more than enough about what sort of people bounty hunters were back in her village. She'd been wrong in the first place trying to appeal to those who had no compunctions about shooting or stabbing the backs of those they pursued, criminals or not.

"Fine. Wesley, I'll go with you."

That drew a cold but surprised grumbling from them.

Meg turned around and said, "Just you remember this. Once we've rescued the sheriff, we're gonna tell him all about how the rest of you left him for dead. When it comes time to get paid, don't come crying to us!"

The men exchanged glances. Meg's words couldn't be discounted as the screeching of a mere slip of a girl. This could have a direct impact on their livelihood.

"Oh, that's hitting us where it hurts," said a voice Meg could've sworn she hadn't heard before. Of course, that couldn't be the case. She'd heard all of the bounty hunters speak back at the village. However, this man was so taciturn and his voice so low it hadn't stuck in her memory.

"You folks can let your earnings get pared down if you like. But I'm going, too."

Meg and Wesley gazed at the speaker, once again puzzled that he hadn't made more of an impression.

He wore a ten-gallon hat—also known in the western Frontier as a cowboy hat—at an angle, but not much could be made out besides his

aquiline nose. Given that the bandanna wound about his neck was red as blood, it was surprising that he'd escaped notice so long. The gunpowder rifle worn across his back on a leather strap looked quite old, and the thick tube mounted on top of it was something they hadn't seen before. The bullets in the gun belt around his waist were for the high-caliber rifle, and he didn't carry a pistol. Only the leather-wrapped handle of a knife could be glimpsed in one of his boots.

Like the others, he wore his saddlebags on his back. Ordinarily saddlebags were draped across a cyborg horse's back, but by adjusting the straps they could be turned into a knapsack.

The rifleman didn't seem to mind the unpleasant looks from the remaining members of his profession as he gave a toss of his chin in the direction of the forest and said, "We're going, right, Deputy?"

"Call me Wesley. And you're—?"

Before the young lawman could root through his memories, the man replied, "'Cowboy' will do."

"Okay. Let's go. As for you, Meg, you're—"

"I'm going. Don't you think I'd be in more danger staying here with this lot?"

After catching a smirk from Cowboy, Meg glared at the forest.

"Let's go."

They started off with Wesley taking point.

II

Not long after they got on a path winding through trees where white threads rested like cotton, Wesley asked, "You been to this island before?"

"Not once," Meg replied with a resolute shake of her head. By nature, she liked to be perfectly clear about everything.

"Then I guess there's no point in asking what this forest's like, eh?"

"Of course not," Meg managed to respond, though she sounded distracted.

They were in territory controlled by the Nobility, in a forest where tree trunks stood anywhere from thirty to sixty feet high. There was no telling what lurked there.

Everyone knew the Nobility had created organisms with little regard for whether or not they were deadly, then scattered them around the world. Man-eating eagles with sixty-foot wingspans soared the skies, enormous reptiles that might be mistaken for mountains walked the earth, and giant octopuses reached from the sea with tentacles that seemed to threaten the very stars above the horizon. In the eastern Frontier, where enormous reptiles were particularly abundant, their tremendous mass caused the ground to settle nearly

an inch every year, and that combined with the tsunamis summoned by sea sprites to cause widespread damage on a regular basis. An average-looking stand of trees might suddenly bare fangs, vines could reach out and snatch up people, and a rabbit not unlike the one you'd cuddled the day before might pounce on you—only this one would be fifteen feet tall and as disproportionately violent as it was large. No human was known to have escaped the sixty-foot leaps those monstrous rabbits could make.

After pressing ahead for nearly ten minutes, Wesley halted. And Meg knew why. The wind had shifted. It blew at them now, carrying the scent of blood. The stench was so thick, Wesley and Meg began coughing in unison.

"We're close." Wesley gave the air a sniff, slowly testing for the direction the scent of blood was coming from.

"That way," Meg said, stepping off the path and dashing off at an angle.

Wesley hastened after her, and after running about thirty yards he stopped.

Meg was standing there.

The deputy's heart was pounding madly not just because he'd been running full tilt, but because of the scene that lay before him. About thirty feet off the ground a gigantic white spiderweb was strung between the trees. Glittering in the dappled sunlight, it could even be described as beautiful. If not for the pair of corpses that lay beneath the web.

"Pa?!"

Wesley ran straight for them because, even though one of the bodies was weirdly twisted, it was still his father.

As natural as that was for him, Meg remained rooted because the other remains, more horrible than the sheriff's in some ways, still had a kind of beauty to them. In a manner of speaking, the corpse was a double-edged blade. The giant spider was purple with crimson spots, and its seven-foot-long body had been split in two right through its stocky abdomen. The slice through it was exquisite. As she was looking at the spider, Meg couldn't tell whether she was frightened by its brutalized remains, or mesmerized by the perfectly beautiful slice through it.

Clinging to his father's corpse, Wesley sounded a million miles away as he called out his name.

"Hell of a thing, isn't it?" Cowboy said in a voice that called to mind iron. "Cutting a monster like this in two with a sword. Who in the hell—"

Meg was just about to reply in a frightened tone that she knew who'd done it. Only one gorgeous man could've cut down this monster

with such grace and beauty.

The girl nodded. The figure in black she'd glimpsed on the cliff over the village wavered seductively behind her shut eyelids. Neither giving nor receiving a single ray of light, he was exquisite.

"What about his father?"

Cowboy's query brought Meg back. She looked over at Wesley. The sheriff's body lay on the ground, and Wesley was praying beside it. He had both hands clenched tightly, and they trembled ever so slightly. Was that from anger or grief? Actually, it was both.

"He's dead."

That was all she said. Now back to her senses, Meg let out a deep breath. But no tears fell.

"We've confirmed the worst. Let's go," Wesley said, standing up.

"But, your father—we've gotta bury him," said the girl.

"I wish like hell we could, but it'll have to wait till later. The job comes first."

He's got what it takes, thought Meg. *Not at all what he was like earlier. Was he this driven by duty before?*

Wesley looked over at Cowboy and repeated, "Let's go."

"Not yet."

"Huh?" Meg said—and just then, there was the crack of gunfire.

Cowboy had discharged his rifle. But when had he managed it? A split second earlier the weapon had still been hanging on his back, and he'd shown no sign of bracing for action.

"Pa?!" Wesley cried out.

Bullets had pierced the sheriff's heart and forehead. The shots had come with such speed they seemed simultaneous.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

An electric jolt of fury made Wesley's right hand jump to the pistol on his hip—and stop. The smoking barrel of the rifle was pointed right between his eyes.

"Simmer down. Sorry, but I had to deal with this my own way. See, out in the western Frontier I've seen other kinds of living dead besides Nobles. And those ones you've gotta plug through the head to kill."

"Then why didn't you say so? And why through the heart, too?"

"The ticker's just to be sure. And if I'd asked you beforehand, would you have given me the okay?"

Meg touched a soothing hand to Wesley's right arm. Though she didn't actually come out and say it, that was her way of telling him Cowboy was right.

Wesley let the strength drain from his body. His hand pulled away from his pistol. Relief spread across his face, but it immediately pulled tight again.

Cowboy hadn't lowered his rifle, and murderous intent emanated from every inch of him.

The two young people stood there unable to do anything, and a second later their eyes caught a fiery shot. Unlike a pistol, this had a roar like a rumbling in the earth, and it shook the stand of trees. Meg and Wesley only turned to look because the anguished cries of a beast had risen behind them.

A black form was in the process of lying down in the midst of flying gore. Even before the realization that there'd been a vicious beast coming up behind them could flash through the pair's minds, there was once again a burst of flame and a thunderous roar that shook them both. Straightening up from the hunched positions they'd taken, they turned their eyes in the direction the shots had gone.

Quiet had returned to the stand of trees, as if there hadn't been any shooting at all just now. In a thicket about thirty feet ahead of them a bloodstained gray body writhed weakly, but that wasn't what held the trio's attention.

"That second shot—what did you see?" Wesley asked, his query sounding oddly shaken. He was staring at Cowboy's face.

"A person. One dressed in black." The tough's voice sounded terribly hollow.

Before Meg could ask him about something, he said something else. It was the very thing she'd meant to ask.

"Only, maybe he wasn't human after all. That was one good-looking man."

III

Wesley carried the sheriff's body back to the bay. Though the water that'd protected the three of them had since evaporated, the spider's threads had seemingly lost their stickiness, turning to dust when anyone touched them.

On their way back, Meg's mind turned to the matter of the "good-looking man" Cowboy had seen. In fact, it'd be safe to say he completely filled the girl's thoughts. The most important question—what exactly he was doing on the island—didn't even occur to her. Meg's memory struggled simply to re-create the beauty Cowboy had recounted. Yet when they returned to the bay and found no one else there, she had no choice but to return to her senses.

Blue had begun to tinge their faintly fogged world, where there were only the furtive sounds of the breeze and lapping waves. Though Wesley and Cowboy shouted for them time and again, no one ever appeared. The trio split up to check out the buildings and the boats tied up at the dock, but their efforts were in vain.

"Where the blazes did they run off to?" Wesley spat on returning from one of the buildings. His words were swallowed up by the thin fog.

"I don't figure they were attacked by anything. No matter how off-guard they might've been taken, I don't think they could be carried off without a fight. Maybe they fell under a spell or something?" Cowboy murmured.

"They just set out on their own!" Meg snarled. Looking over at Wesley, she continued, "Every bit of food and water stashed in the boat is gone. Pardon me, but I'm just gonna come right out and say it. Those jerks never had any intentions of taking orders from you. We're lucky to be rid of them, but they took off on their own—I think that's the truth of it."

Wesley's face was devoid of emotion as he looked over at Cowboy, who looked away for a minute before nodding his agreement.

"I see. Not much we can do about that. But let me make it clear that since they're not following my directives, they'll be considered civilians who landed on the island of their own accord. In other words, they're guilty of stealing our food and water. They'll receive no compensation, and I'll only give them the bare minimum of aid as a sheriff's deputy. You're an exception to that, but just keep it in mind."

"Sure thing," Cowboy said, and the lawman watched to make sure he raised one hand. The bounty hunter continued, "So, are we gonna head off, too?" He gave a toss of his chin in the direction of the path they'd returned on.

Flustered, Meg said, "Not without food and water we can't. Why don't we go back first and gather the people and stuff we'll need before coming back? This island belongs to the Nobility! No telling what's hanging around out here."

Wesley hesitated. He knew Meg had a point. Under the circumstances, that would be the best course to follow. However, his pride wouldn't allow him to run away just because his food was gone and his compatriots had disappeared. What's more—

"Look at that, Meg."

The deputy had just turned toward the bay so that he'd be facing Meg, and it was in that direction he pointed. Cowboy had already noticed the same thing.

On turning, Meg froze in place. She didn't know when it could've happened, but the prow of the small boat that'd borne them there was pointed straight in the air. Not only that, but the boats belonging to the group of settlers were already pointed toward the heavens and shaking in their final moments as if they'd been torpedoed, slowly slipping underwater. However, it was no normal case of sinking.

"Are those hands—human hands?!" Meg cried, on the edge of madness, pointing at the countless hands protruding from the surface of the blue-black sea to grip the boats' hulls.

Damp hair clung to expressionless, blue-black faces, looking like brutal wounds. One turned their way. Its eyes met Meg's. Meg felt as if she were about to break off at the knees, but her ears—and those of the other two—were assailed by a voice that sounded like a noise an insect might make. It was pointing in their direction.

Those who clung to each and every vessel there turned that way in unison. Their expressions, their gazes, their complexions—the girl from the village was too afraid to even faint as the boats' prows finally sank. It happened with such speed, it seemed as if they'd all been dragged down by some enormous sea monster.

The waters churned, and waves barreled toward the rockface. The

spray reached all the way to the top. And from the spray there'd shot a human form. It landed on its belly a mere fifteen feet from where the trio stood.

It looks like a fish with hands and feet, Meg thought, fighting back her nausea. As a child, she'd often done an imitation of a fish. She'd seen drunken adults do it, too. It'd been something to laugh about then, but the real thing was truly disturbing.

There was one splash after another. Dripping water on the rockface all the while, nearly a dozen men and women closed on the trio. Like fish out of water, they puckered their mouths as they clawed across the ground with both hands.

"Are these—are they your villagers?"

Meg shook her head in response to Wesley's query. "I don't know. I've never seen them before—maybe they're the ones who crossed over to the island?"

"Whatever the case, they don't seem too accustomed to dry land," Cowboy said, still not having taken the rifle off his back. He must've been supremely confident of his speed with it.

"Can you understand what I'm saying?" Wesley said to the fish people. "Are you the folks who crossed over to the island from the village? See, I came here from your village. I'm a lawman. Understand?"

A number of them made croaking sounds with their throats. Blue-black water spouted from their mouths and the sides of their necks.

"They've got gills! They've been changed," Wesley said, drawing his handgun. This was too weird for him to handle.

"Hey, if you understand what I'm saying, let me know," said the girl. "Yesterday, the folks vanished from my village. Are they all here? Are they on the island?"

Meg's pained figure was reflected in muddied eyes. The blank look on their faces said they didn't even know what they were doing. Suddenly a stream of black connected a fortyish man's face and Meg. Her scream was prompted by the black water. The man had spat it out. As Meg covered her face and reeled, the man spat something else at her.

There was a roar of thunder.

Turned toward Meg with his handgun at the ready, Wesley was frozen in place. It wasn't his gun that'd blasted the thing to pieces.

"Here they come!" Cowboy said, swinging around the smoking barrel of his rifle.

Two of the three objects flying at the trio were blown to pieces, but one latched onto Wesley's right shoulder. It was a little blue-black fish, but when it opened its tiny mouth it had rows of teeth like razor-sharp shards of glass. And it had bitten into the flesh of the young

man's shoulder.

Though he cried out in pain, Wesley shifted his gun from his right hand to his left and hammered it down on the fish's head. Making the same noise the man had moments earlier, the fish with the pulverized head dangled limply from the young man's shoulder. Its fangs were still sunk in his flesh. The blood gushing out stained its corpse red.

"Run for it!" Meg shouted, taking Wesley by the arm and dashing for the forest. Cowboy was right behind them. Though relief flooded through her chest as soon as they made it into the trees, Meg ran on.

"Enough, we're good now, Meg," Wesley told her, and she finally halted.

They turned around.

Cowboy was facing the bay with his rifle braced down by his hip.

"How'd it go?" Wesley asked. His breathing was ragged. Deep red had completely soaked his right shoulder.

"You little bastard!" Meg said, making a grab for the fish still latched onto him. With a squeal she pulled her hand back. Though it should've been dead, she could distinctly feel the organs still working within it.

"It's alive!"

It came as no surprise that Wesley peered down at the fish, but even Cowboy craned his neck, squinted his eyes, and said, "It's sucking your blood!"

"What?"

"Look. The gills are moving. It's inhaling. Only it's getting blood instead of seawater."

"What the hell is this?"

"You bashed its head in, but it's not dead. Must be nearly immortal. And it came to suck your blood."

Cowboy looked at Wesley. Perhaps the lawman read something in the bounty hunter's expression, because Wesley's face twisted horribly.

"Don't!" Meg cried, reaching for Cowboy with both hands.

The bounty hunter stopped. He'd just been about to draw a bead on Wesley's chest with his rifle. But Meg's right hand gripped the pistol she'd pried from Wesley's grasp.

"You were gonna shoot him, weren't you? You can't!"

The girl's face was stiff with determination, but Cowboy gave her a wry grin and said, "Well, you stopped me, so you must know why I aimed to shoot him, right? That fish is in league with the Nobility. Meaning whatever it feeds on will turn into one of them." He looked directly at Wesley, whose face was pale, and continued, "If we don't take care of you now, sooner or later you'll feed on us!"

His voice was like iron, and it carried a determination that rivaled

Meg's own.

A Demonic Spot beneath Blue Skies

chapter 3

I

No, you can't do this!" Meg cried frantically. Her body trembled fiercely, and her eyes were hot and wet. She couldn't let herself cry, though. "This is just a fish! There's no saying it's necessarily the same as a Noble. If by some chance it just happens to be a regular fish, you'll be a murderer, with your own kind chasing you down for the rest of your days!"

"That still sounds better than hanging around with someone who might be a Noble. Lower your gun."

"No way. Lower yours first. Please, let's talk this out."

"You think you can get a shot off quicker than me?" Cowboy asked, seeming to mock the girl with the question. "Your slug wouldn't reach me till I'd killed you both three times over!"

"You're probably right."

"Yet you're still willing to do this?"

"I don't care how dangerous it is," Meg said. "I can't let you shoot someone on a fifty-fifty chance. And I won't let you become a murderer."

The killing lust that colored Cowboy from head to toe wavered suddenly.

"You have guts," he said, casually turning his rifle toward the ground.

"Swear you won't use it again?" Meg said to him, the handgun still trained on the bounty hunter.

"Yeah, so long as he's still himself. But if I see the slightest hint of him turning into a Noble, I'll shoot him dead without a word."

"Fair enough," Wesley said with a nod. Meg looked stricken, but the young man gave her a nod too. "If I start acting funny, plug away. That's an official request."

"Sure thing," Cowboy replied.

Meg lowered the pistol.

Gently taking the weapon from the girl, Wesley said, "It's okay, Meg. I'm gonna get rid of this bugger now."

And saying that, he turned the barrel of his gun toward the parasite on his shoulder. Once he was sure no one else was in the line

of fire, he prepared to pull the trigger.

There was a dull thud against the lawman's temple, and he was knocked unconscious.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Meg cried, the corners of her eyes rising angrily.

Pointing to the gunstock he'd hit Wesley with, Cowboy told her, "It's got a rubber pad on it. All he got was a slight concussion out of that. But just try firing off a shot now. Weird stuff would be all over us in a second!"

Meg had to admit he was right. This place was home to Nobles and their servants. Humans were no more than prey for them.

"We'll set out once he comes to. Take a minute to cool down, why don't you."

And saying that, Cowboy tossed Meg something he'd had tucked in the back of his gun belt. It was a little spray can.

"That's a cooling mist. Works as a painkiller, too. I've used all kinds, but this stuff's the best."

"You're not all bad, are you?"

Cowboy looked all around them, and once Meg had finished applying the spray he said to the groaning Wesley, "Okay, on your feet, Deputy. Your dad left you some mighty big boots to fill."

Letting out a sharp breath, Cowboy fell to his knees. On the other hand, Wesley stood up. The lawman lightly nudged the tough with the same foot he'd driven into the man's solar plexus.

"He'll be able to walk soon enough. Let's hurry up through the forest," the lawman said, clapping Meg on the shoulder.

Seems pretty dependable, Meg thought, and she felt her chest growing warm. It was the same comforting sensation she'd felt so long ago getting a hug from her father when he came back from fishing.

In about ten minutes' time they were through the forest. There were signs of things rustling about in the distance, but nothing came after the trio.

On exiting the forest, Meg scanned their surroundings apprehensively and said, "The others probably took a different route, but I wonder if they made it through okay."

She was referring to the rest of the bounty hunters.

"Forget about those bastards," Wesley spat. "More importantly—I'm gonna shoot this fish. You got a problem with that?"

"Do what you like," Cowboy replied, sounding somewhat amused. He didn't seem to hold a grudge over the kick in the gut the lawman had given him. Actually, he seemed quite curious to see whether the Nobles' fish could be destroyed.

"Still," the bounty hunter continued, "a big bang could cause trouble for us. Wrap some cloth around your gun. Hey, you'd better be

quick about this. You're looking mighty sickly!"

Meg handed the lawman a towel she had tucked through her belt. Wesley wrapped the whole gun in it, doubling up on the fabric around the cylinder. His weapon was a revolver, with a cylinder that turned every time a bullet was fired. But that meant there had to be a gap between the cylinder and the frame. If there wasn't, the cylinder couldn't turn. When the weapon was discharged, the sound of the gunshot could also escape through that gap. Just wrapping the barrel wouldn't be enough to muffle the sound.

"Here we go," Wesley said, taking aim and pulling the trigger.

There was a muffled report, and the fish's body was blown clean off.

"What the—?!" Wesley shouted.

"Persistent little sucker," Meg groaned.

The head of the fish still had its teeth deep in Wesley's shoulder. A threadlike stream of blood dribbled from the creature's pulverized portion to seep into the ground.

"Nothing left but its head . . . and it's still feeding on him!" the girl exclaimed.

Saying nothing, Wesley cocked the hammer for a second shot. Since his target was even smaller now, he took careful aim—and the second bullet hit the fish's head, blasting it to bits.

"That time did it!" Meg exclaimed, pumping her fist in spite of herself.

"Nope, not yet," Cowboy countered with a shake of his head.

"What?"

"See for yourself."

Even Wesley himself looked where the bounty hunter was pointing. There was no fish there anymore. However, a pair of white teeth remained. And to all appearances those teeth made sounds that suggested pleasure as they continued their weird work, sinking even deeper into the flesh of Wesley's gore-stained shoulder and wringing out more of his lifeblood.

Wesley grabbed the teeth by the roots and pulled, but they didn't budge and he soon relented.

"They're curved like hooks, and sunk in there real good. No chance of getting them out without an operation. Luckily, the bleeding's not so bad. We'll keep going like this."

"With things like that flying around, I'm surprised all of us were okay."

"All of us?" Wesley gave Meg a glare that made her hastily button her lip.

"Okay, now the question is where to go next—got any good ideas, Sheriff?"

“Knock it off. I’m a deputy,” Wesley said, tying the towel around his shoulder.

But Cowboy replied, “No, you’re not.”

“Huh?”

“You stopped being a deputy the moment the sheriff died. Naturally, you’ve got to take on the sheriff’s responsibilities. Rise to the occasion, okay? From here on out, we’re gonna treat you like a sheriff. Isn’t that right, missy?”

“It’s Meg.”

“Meg,” Cowboy said.

“I agree. That’s what I’m gonna do. You hang in there, Wesley,” she said, clinging to his arm with a look of sincerity on her face, causing the young lawman’s expression to stiffen.

It took Wesley a whole second to work up a smile. In his present state, that undoubtedly seemed like an eternity. He lightly slapped his own cheeks a few times in succession. Then he took a deep breath and exhaled. As he gazed at the other two, he looked a little tougher than before.

“Then as sheriff, let me give you an order. From here on out, you’re to do whatever I tell you. I won’t stand for any back talk. We clear on that?”

“Yes, sir!” Meg replied, raising her right hand and elbowing Cowboy. He said nothing, but raised his right hand too.

“Good enough. Let’s go, then.”

Wesley turned his back to the two of them.

A mountain loomed before them. In its side there yawned a black maw five yards wide. It was a stony tunnel. From the skill with which the rock had been cut and fit together, it was clear it hadn’t been the work of human hands. This was undoubtedly a Noble project. A road, also paved in cut stone, connected to the path the trio had taken through the forest, as well as running up either side of the mountain.

“I don’t get it,” Meg said, cocking her head to one side as her rubber boots became accustomed to the road.

“Don’t get what?” Wesley inquired.

“Why the Nobility do the things they do. They could fly the skies with ease, yet the harbor was filled with boats for crossing the very seas that give ’em so much trouble. There are even vessels that go underwater. And then there’s this road and the tunnel. Even after putting a perfectly good road plumb through the middle of the mountain, they still threw in those alternate routes.”

“It’s a phenomenon called ‘Noble Wastefulness,’” said Cowboy.

“I think I’ve heard of that. What is it?”

“It seems they have this tech called ‘tele-something-or-other’ that could break a person down to itty-bitty pieces and send ’em to the

moon in a split second. Still, they say about five thousand years ago the Nobility constructed a pathway from this one spot on Earth up to the moon."

Cowboy closed his mouth. This was due to the fact that Meg and Wesley had both let theirs drop open. He waited a little while, but as their mouths remained open, he continued in a rough tone, "It ain't around now, though. See, the aliens wrecked it during the OSB wars. Still, it's called a perfect example of the whole 'Noble Wastefulness' phenomenon."

"That certainly is a waste," Meg acknowledged with a nod. When she glanced up at him again, with a look of sudden discovery she said, "Now that you mention it, this old poet who came to our village a long time ago said something. According to him, the Nobility lived for their destruction. Or is that not the same thing? It's just, that's what came to me right now."

"Well, if it were just a matter of squandering resources they'd have noticed at some point and put a stop to it. This was intentional wastefulness which would probably lead to their destruction. They loved their roads and carriages even though they could fly through the skies, and I don't think that was just due to their tendency for nostalgia. Somewhere deep down, the Nobility probably had some dark impulse they didn't even know about."

Meg nodded. A strange sense of solidarity enveloped the two of them.

"At any rate, let's get moving. No dawdling, you two!" Wesley shouted somewhat irritably, having already started walking toward the tunnel. Perhaps he could sense something.

II

It was Wesley who remarked, "This is odd."

Having thought the same thing for a while now, Meg nodded agreement in her heart of hearts.

Though they'd been walking for a good three hours, there was no sign of the exit. Worse yet, it didn't really feel like they'd been walking—or rather, that they'd gained any ground. It almost felt as if they were walking on a treadmill moving in the opposite direction at exactly the same speed. When they turned around, however, the entrance they'd used had long since vanished. Still, they managed to continue walking because the walls, which seemed to be made of ordinary stone, gave off a pale blue glow.

Could it be we'll be stuck in this tunnel forever?

No sooner had that foolish worry sprouted in Meg's mind than Wesley exclaimed, "Let's take a rest," and crumpled to the floor.

“Not looking too sharp there, Sheriff,” Cowboy told the huffing and puffing young man in a judgmental tone. “But then, there just seems to be no freaking end to this. It’s draining, both physically and mentally.”

On seeing the way the bounty hunter propped his left hand against the wall, Meg grew twice as anxious. If that was the state the two men were in, all she could do was keep on plugging.

“I don’t know anything about the interior of the island, but I have heard how large it’s supposed to be,” the girl said. “The rough estimate is about forty-two square miles. Think of a circle less than seven and a half miles in diameter. If we were going at a rate of two and a half miles per hour, hell, we should already be off the island by this point!”

“Maybe it runs clean to the far end of the island,” Wesley said, looking up at Meg. Though his voice was steady, it was immediately clear he was pushing himself. It was on account of those teeth. The towel around his shoulder was stained deep red. And even now the little monster that no longer had a brain or a heart was drinking his blood in accordance with the will of the Nobility.

“The island’s mostly flat,” Meg countered. “The only mountains on it are on the southern coast. I doubt this tunnel is even six miles long.”

“But it’s not like we can turn back at this point. We got no choice but to push on.”

Meg nodded. It was a moot discussion. Indeed, they had no choice but to keep going.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“I’m good,” Wesley said, getting to his feet.

“It’s rough not having anything to eat or drink, though. We’ve gotta get out of here, and soon.”

Cowboy’s casual remark once again ignited Meg’s fears. *We’ve gotta get out of here. But what if we can’t? We’ll end up starving to death in this tunnel.*

As if to banish her fears, Meg started to walk point for the party.

“What in the—?!” she exclaimed, halting after she’d gone about ten paces.

Up ahead there lay what looked to be a human figure.

“Who is it?”

“Lancer,” Cowboy replied, his rifle over his shoulder.

Meg strained her eyes. His short spear lay atop his stomach. She finally realized where the bounty hunter had gotten his name. The girl was about to step forward when Cowboy stopped her by saying, “Lancer, can you hear me?”

There was no response. He asked again, and then a third time—all to the same result.

“All right, then.”

A roar echoed down the tunnel. Sparks leapt right by Lancer’s head.

Amid the echoes, the face that’d been pointed toward the ceiling slowly turned in the trio’s direction. It was indeed the short-spear specialist.

“Recognize me, Lancer? It’s me, Cowboy.”

The man’s elongated face nodded.

“You bastards ran off on us. I don’t know what happened in here, but it seems like you’ve really been through the wringer. Serves you right, too!”

Lancer raised his right hand and beckoned to the other man. He then pointed to his throat, and opened and closed his mouth repeatedly. He couldn’t speak.

The other three exchanged looks. Could he be trusted? They were dealing with the Nobility here, so there was no telling what might’ve happened to Lancer.

“Let’s go. And keep your gun on him just like you’ve got it now.”

And saying that, Wesley stepped forward.

When he was within fifteen feet, Wesley halted and asked, “Can you talk?”

“After a fashion,” came the reply in the wasted tone of a centenarian.

“What happened?”

“We went through the forest while you folks were gone and ended up here. Then it was into the tunnel. But no matter how far we walked, we couldn’t see the exit. That asshole Bo got pissed off and said he was gonna turn back. So we told him to do whatever the hell he liked, he took off on his own, and the rest of us kept going. And then—”

Meg let out a small cry.

Something white drifted up ahead.

“—the fog rolled in,” Lancer murmured faintly.

“Watch yourselves. Either keep within arm’s reach of one another, or call out to keep track of everyone’s location. Stick together,” said Cowboy.

Meg braced the harpoon in her right hand for action, and used her left to hold onto Wesley’s arm.

Their surroundings were bleached white.

“We started walking through the fog,” Lancer continued in a tone that sounded gloomy.

Swirling white mist swallowed his form, then the trio.

Meg listened intently. She had great confidence in her hearing. When waiting for her prey on calm seas, she had to be able to hear the

sound of a fin breaking the surface or catch the splash of a leaping fish. She'd hear a pebble fall if it were within fifty yards of her.

"And after we'd walked plenty, from up ahead . . ."

Sound vibrated against her eardrums. Not just one. Countless little sounds—footfalls.

". . . they closed on us. Many, so many . . . Closing on us fast . . . So fast, you'd think they'd been waiting for us . . ."

Lancer must've still been there. And he continued speaking.

"There's a ton of 'em coming!"

By the time Meg's words reached her two companions, so had the sound of the footsteps.

Wesley drew his gun and shouted into the depths of the white fog, "Halt! I'm a sheriff. Halt, or I'll shoot!"

The footsteps didn't stop. To the contrary—they broke into a run!

"Here they come!"

"Run for it!" Wesley exclaimed, turning around. Grabbing Meg's left hand, he dashed forward. He could sense Cowboy right beside them and hear his footfalls.

"We ended up getting separated," Lancer continued. He just went on and on. "I fought them, and stabbed a few to death. And then I dropped. Not that I was wounded. Out of hunger."

Meg suddenly noticed something. Where was Lancer's voice coming from? Right by her ear. It couldn't be that he was *following her*, could it?

Suddenly, there was a great weight on the girl's back. A hoarse voice whispered in her ear, "I'm hungry. Give me something. Some hot blood!"

Her whole body trembled. "Nooo!" Meg screamed, but cold breath fell on the nape of her neck.

Next—a gunshot rang out. The weight on Meg's back jerked hard to the right, then vanished.

"You okay?!"

The smell of gunpowder came from the same direction as Wesley's voice.

"I'm fine—but Lancer's become one of the Nobility."

"I know. The fog broke for a second, and I saw his face. He was sporting fangs."

"I sure am," Lancer said, his voice falling down at them from overhead.

Meg's ears alone caught the sound of something knifing through the air. Not that she realized it was a spear. The horizontal slash she made with her harpoon was purely out of reflex. The clang of them coming together was rather light, but there was the sound of something heavy hitting the road not far off.

“Take that!” the girl exclaimed, thrusting out with the harpoon with all her might. Even before she heard the cry of pain she felt it make contact. And she heard the sound of someone falling after she’d run another fifteen or twenty feet.

The footsteps were still following them.

They must’ve run at least a hundred yards already. Suddenly Meg’s feet tangled. Staggering, she let go of Wesley’s arm.

“Wesley!”

“Over here,” a voice called off to her right. The way it seemed a hundred yards off made Meg’s hair stand on end.

It was a second later that the voice became a scream. The unmistakable sound of a body being pierced had come from Wesley’s position. There was a beastly cry from the lawman as the sound of his footfalls grew chaotic. The thud of his fall echoed, and the sight of the end of the spear that was stuck in him somewhere skimmed briefly across the girl’s retinas.

“Wesley, where are you?!” Meg cried, but the very instant she started to her right she was enveloped by a bluish darkness.

It must’ve been evening. Meg was standing in a forest—though the distance between the trees was so great, it might’ve been more accurate to call it some woods.

Meg looked up. The moon was out.

“How in the world? What am I doing out here? And Wesley . . . ?”

She turned around, but there was just more of the woods. Both the tunnel and Wesley had vanished completely. No, there could be no doubt they were even now locked in deadly battle back in that world of white mist. It was Meg who’d vanished.

“That short spear . . . He was more than a hundred yards away . . . So, that’s Lancer’s power, is it?”

There was no one there to answer her. The world continued to shout at Meg, *You’re on your own. Try to make it through alone.*

III

“Dad, what do I do?”

Meg thought back on her father. The same father who’d taught her all she needed to know about life on the seas. His lessons had to apply to more than just out on the water.

Make sure you’re safe. This was the first thing that flashed into her head. *Once you know you’re safe, then don’t think about anything. Not hope, not despair. Forget everything. If you can’t do that, you might as well give up. Then, calm down. Next—*

She didn’t know whether she was safe or not. However, she didn’t seem to be in danger. With that assessment, Meg lay down on the

grass. She had a good view of the moon. The wind swept by at a soothing pace.

Smells nice, the girl thought.

Somewhere, the breeze had brushed through flowers in bloom.

Suddenly she felt at ease. There was no point screaming or crying about it. If she wanted to live, she'd have to go it alone.

I'm not giving up, Dad, she thought. *But I'm gonna rest now. I'm tired.*

Meg closed her eyes. She quickly fell asleep.

The girl opened her eyes. Fatigue still lay in the marrow of her bones, but she felt better than earlier. The moon glowed more intensely, and the darkness was deeper.

"A little over an hour, I guess," she said, referring to how long she'd been asleep.

When you were out at sea, you had to read your environment to know how much time had passed. If you couldn't read the sky due to inclement weather, you had only your five senses to rely on. Meg had been going out fishing with the boys since she was little, and her father had drilled the importance of that internal clock into the girl.

"Okay, next."

Her right hand naturally came to rest on her abdomen. She was terribly hungry. And thirsty as well.

"*You have to get to where there are other people.* That's the ticket."

Her eyes grew sharp. The girl realized she might dine on the sorts of monstrous creatures she was likely to encounter in her travels.

"Toward that end . . ."

Her determined face swept all around her.

Meg went over to one tree and snapped off its lowest branch. Panting for breath, she grunted, "Not exactly easy on an empty stomach!"

Drawing the knife tucked through her belt, she began to whittle a point at the end of the three-foot branch. The blade was as sharp as always. It was a first-class knife purchased from an itinerant merchant out of the Capital. Her father had always said, *Use only the best for the things your life depends on, even if it means you've gotta sell your house to get 'em.*

For half an hour she worked out in the moonlight. Easy to grip and easy to throw—when it came to the tools of her trade, Meg didn't cut any corners.

In no time, she exclaimed, "Yes!" and pumped a fist at the moon as if in challenge, but she brought it back down again immediately.

Clutching three handcrafted wooden harpoons, Meg slumped to the ground. Her stomach rumbled feebly.

"Oh hell. I'm so hungry!"

She was just thinking how pathetic she sounded when the grass in

front of her swayed. It was a sign something was approaching.

"Already?"

She hadn't expected to put her harpoons to use so quickly, but no sooner had she hauled back with her right hand to hurl one than a figure stepped from the darkness.

"Meg," a voice called to her—and the girl jumped to her feet.

"Toma?! Is that you?!" she cried out, surprise and joy churning in her heart. She lowered her harpoon.

Somewhere in her mind, a voice told her to wait.

"Meg."

The figure was now close enough that she could clearly make out his face. There was no mistaking him. It was Toma. Meg's boyfriend. The nineteen-year-old boy who swore he'd live his whole life in that village.

"Great. I'm so happy you're okay. Say, Toma, where's everybody else?"

"They're safe," Toma replied in his usual, somewhat rapid, tone. "Some of them escaped, and they're with me."

"Does that include my family?"

"No, your folks didn't get away. Your mom was in such a state of shock she couldn't stand. Bass is taking care of her."

"Where are they?!"

"Inside one of the Nobility's facilities."

"And just where is that?"

"By the northern cape."

"I see. And the rest of your group?"

"They're hiding nearby. Come with me."

"Okay," Meg replied, and she was just about to head over to her boyfriend when she suddenly halted. Furrowing her brow, she asked Toma, "Tell me, just how did you know I was out here?"

For the briefest of moments Toma had a scary look, but he soon broke into a grin.

"Oh, that's right. Good question. See, I wasn't actually out looking for you. Old Kapsch and Hadira were bellyaching about how hungry they were. I thought maybe I'd find some night hares or something."

Hadira was the far-from-old Kapsch's third son. It was little wonder a three-year-old would complain about an empty belly.

"I see. Sorry."

Meg made a move to throw her arms around Toma, but he pushed her back.

"Let's save the hugging and kissing till I know for sure we're safe."

"What, are you mad at me?"

"Nope. It's just with everyone else to worry about, I'm not really in the mood for that stuff."

Meg recalled how the strapping young man was the very picture of consideration. With only thin planks between them and hell, fishermen had rough dispositions. They had to be hard, or they couldn't do the job. And while they recognized that Toma was as rough as any of them, the way he listened so attentively to the pearls of wisdom from an old minstrel who drifted into town, and his kindness in not only paying the man too generously for his services but also giving him some medicine because he was old had touched Meg's heart.

"I guess you're right," the girl conceded. "Lead the way."

As they headed west through the woods, Meg told Toma all about what'd happened up to that point.

"I wonder why I was the only one who suddenly went from being in the tunnel to out here?" she said.

"This island's kinda funny. Sometimes you mean to go right and end up turning left. It's like space is all twisted around. Like, you walk due north, but you wind up in the south."

"That bites. I wonder if Wesley and the bounty hunter are still in the tunnel? Or did they wind up somewhere else, like me?"

"Who knows," Toma replied, heaving a sigh.

After about thirty minutes, they came to a rough, rocky place. There was the sound of waves nearby. The sea must've been right ahead of them.

A number of figures appeared from behind the grotesquely shaped rocks. Each and every face was one Meg recognized.

"Mr. Kemp. And Miss Hardy."

They were all villagers she'd watched walk off across the foggy bay.

"So, you're all okay. That's great!"

Perhaps they knew Meg's cry of joy came from the bottom of her heart, because everyone in the group smiled in unison.

Meg stopped in her tracks. She'd just caught a glimpse of something. The thought it might've been *those* made everyone's smiles vanish.

"What's the matter?" Toma asked from behind her.

Meg shook her head wildly. Gripping a harpoon, she said, "Toma, let's get out of here."

"What?"

"Let's go. Say goodbye to everybody."

"But why?" he asked, a stunned look in his eyes.

"It's nothing."

"Oh, I get it. Is it these?" Miriam Hardy said with a smile, pointing to the corners of her lips.

The pair of fangs didn't suit the lovely widow. Nor did they look

good on Mr. Kemp. Or on his family, who stepped out behind him. The moonlight seemed to focus solely on their fangs.

"They got all of you, didn't they?" Meg said, tears spilling from her eyes.

"It happened before we even knew it, and we couldn't do anything to stop it."

"Meg," she heard Toma's voice say from behind her, and he sounded at a loss.

His position became clear. As she turned around, Meg raised her wooden harpoon and let it fly.

Toma stared in astonishment at the long, long stake that'd gone clean through his back. His expression seemed to say he didn't understand what'd happened.

"You always were pretty perverted, you know that?" Meg said, making no motion to wipe at her streaming tears. "Every time you saw me, you'd always kiss me, try to touch me. But now, you didn't try to lay a finger on me. I thought that was odd. And another thing—you said you were out hunting hares, but you didn't have any gear for the job."

"If I'd let you touch me, you'd have known what happened to me . . . My body's as cold as ice."

Staggering to and fro, Toma opened his mouth and spat out a stream of blood, revealing a pair of gory fangs.

"But . . . it's not like we wanted . . . to be like this . . . I'm sorry . . . Meg!"

"Who was it? Who did this to you?"

"A pale woman . . . and an old man dressed like a servant. They said . . . we'd be . . . test subjects."

"Test subjects? For what kind of experiments?"

"I don't know . . . It's just . . . the people who were here before . . . made human and Noble . . ."

With a pop, Toma's head flew into the air.

Eddying blood splattered at Meg's feet, and she backed away shrieking. Behind her, she heard a succession of pops. All the girl could do was watch as the heads of one villager after another shot into the air. Every last one of them fell back to earth with a stream of blood trailing after it. A little head rolled to Meg's feet, its face looking up at her reproachfully. The head of Kemp's son. He was only six, as she recalled.

"What the hell?! Who did that?"

Meg's body quaked. Whether it was from anger or grief she didn't know. She felt terribly cold.

The moonlight dimmed. It wasn't that a cloud had moved across it. Another shadow had fallen on Meg.

What the girl saw was a man in black armor floating in midair with his back to the moon. The four cylinders around his body seemed part of some device that gave him the power to disregard gravity.

“As expected, our impromptu puppets didn’t work out too well. We were more concerned about someone else and had to leave this to the puppets, and that’s where we went wrong,” the man said, his voice falling from a height of about ten feet. “Lord Danae says the more test subjects the better, and I had intended to bring you back to the lab, but it seems such a bother. I shall dispose of you here.”

Within a helmet that seemed to be steel burned crimson eyes that made Meg's blood run cold.

Something cold touched her neck. Squeezing tight, it pressed into her flesh.

The girl thought, *That's what made their heads fly off*.

Oddly enough, she was neither scared nor in pain. The moon alone was burned starkly into her retinas.

Off in the distance, a voice rang out. She didn't realize it was a cry of surprise until after the world turned upside down.

Meg fell to her knees on the rocky ground and stared at the pair of figures squaring off some fifteen to twenty feet ahead of her. The armored knight came down a bit to just over six feet off the ground, where he gazed in amazement at a figure in black raiment standing on the rocks.

"When the island came back to life, the first thing we did was to send out the fog. That bit of white deviltry renders all in the world blind and powerless as it drains them of both life and will. However, now there is a wind from across the waves that could scatter it."

The knight's right hand slowly but with overpowering awe took aim at the figure in black.

"It gusts from you."

The figure didn't move. The collar of his black coat and the brim of his traveler's hat hid his profile from Meg's eyes. And the incredible eldritch aura blustering from the area surrounding the pair chilled Meg to the marrow of her bones. And yet, the girl's heart beat faster and her ears could hear the sound of her hot blood racing. Within it, a voice wept with uncontrollable joy, *It's him. The gorgeous man I saw back at the cape.*

"I am Baron Gildea, the chief of security for this experimental island. I would have the name of the man who menaces our very fog."

The reply was succinct.

"D."

Meeting a Century Later
chapter 4

I

What brings you to this island?" the black knight—Baron Gildea—inquired in almost a groan. "We took humans from the mainland. Someone with nerve might come and try to take them back. But that matters little to us. Giants pay no heed to swarming ants. Yet a man such as you mingles with those ants. Why is that, D?"

"Who reactivated the facilities on the island?" His voice was like night-forged steel. "And is Duchess Mizuki Dandorian still at rest?"

Silence descended. Before long, the knight replied in a properly stunned tone, "How do you know Her Grace's name? Who . . . who in the hell are you?"

"A Hunter."

His voice became an arc of silver. Baron Gildea jumped back ten feet in a single go. As soon as the Nobleman touched down on the ground, black blood gushed from his face. Though Meg had noticed that D's right hand was extended before him, she had no idea when he'd actually drawn or how he'd cut his opponent. Wasn't the baron's face supposedly covered by armor?

Meg thought this had to be a nightmare. The scene before her eyes was a battle between a pair of demons far removed from humanity.

D went right up to the baron. A mellifluous *ching!* split the night air. The baron had parried D's blade with the back of one steel gauntlet. At the same time the other hand made a horizontal swipe at D's face. Meg saw the footlong claws at the end of the baron's fingers tear through the pale and beautiful visage. However, D remained as he was, while the baron staggered. This was because D had stepped back with ungodly speed, leaving the claws to slash through empty space. What Meg had seen ripped apart was an afterimage left by the incredible speed of the Hunter's movements.

Having taken one step back and another forward, D delivered a new blow from the high position.

Beneath his armor, the baron had laughter in his eyes. The same hand as before came up and parried the blade. Though sparks flew, the blade didn't stop, and the baron's arm was lopped off at the elbow.

The baron had glimpsed the crimson light that glowed in the depth of D's eyes.

"You—you're a dhampir?!" he asked, leaving a bloody waterfall in

his wake as his body rose into the air. The four cylinders were indeed an antigravity device. “We shall meet—”

The Nobleman was about to say *again* when a diagonal flash of silver pierced his voice box. A dagger hurled by D.

“Gaaah!” he groaned.

For vampires, any wound save a blow to the heart or decapitation would heal almost instantly. However, the foe Gildea faced now was something that surpassed all imagining. He had an ominous feeling the agony that should’ve vanished in a second would continue forever, and the dagger that should’ve come out of him naturally due to internal pressure wouldn’t budge at all, as if it were stuck in stone. Grabbing hold of it, the baron applied additional power. Hellish pain ravaged his brain cells, and he passed out.

His body continued to rise and was swallowed by the night sky.

“You finish him?” inquired a hoarse voice from the vicinity of the Hunter’s left hand, but the young man in black didn’t respond, turning instead toward the depths of the forest.

“Wait!”

Meg ran like a girl possessed, circling around in front of him. Looking down, as if to avoid seeing his face, she said, “I saw you back at the cape. I don’t know who you are, but please, help me.”

It was an entreaty.

Not halting, the young man responded, “No.”

Meg didn’t relent. She couldn’t give up.

“I’m pretty sure you must’ve seen it. But those people that jerk just decapitated were from the same village as me. I don’t know where everyone else who walked off into the fog went. Please, help me look for ’em.”

There was no reply, and the figure in black walked away through the grass.

Meg circled around in front of him once more. Pointing to the corpses, she said, “Even the little kids from my neighborhood got turned into servants of the Nobility. You had to have seen it. Somebody’s gotta save the rest of ’em. Joining the Nobility’s a fate worse than death! Help me before that happens.”

“Everyone’s probably already got a taste of the same,” said a hoarse voice.

Thinking, *Why’s a gorgeous guy like him got a voice like that?* Meg shook her head violently.

“No, that’s not the way it is! The rest are all still alive, waiting to be rescued. We can’t just pretend they don’t exist! I’m begging you, please help me with this.”

He halted.

Met by a countenance so exquisite it rivaled the moon, Meg almost

felt like she, too, was glowing. Yet she was chilled to the very bone.

"You have parents or siblings among them?" the young man inquired in a tone befitting that face.

Meg swooned. "I do," she replied, her own voice sounding distant to her.

"What about a boyfriend?"

The girl returned to her senses. The second voice had been one of lecherous curiosity. Suddenly tears spilled from her. She was so sad it hurt.

"He died. Just a little while ago. I ran him through with a harpoon."

"I'm a Hunter," the young man said, his voice returning to normal. "I came to the island on a personal matter, but do you want to hire me?"

Meg wiped at her tears. "Ye-ye-ye-yes, I do!" she exclaimed, suddenly adding, "Er, about the money—is it okay if I pay you later?"

"Yes, but I don't come cheap."

"I'll pay whatever it takes. I'll break into the vault in the mayor's office if need be. Hell, I'll sell my body to make the money if it comes to that."

Somewhere, the hoarse voice laughed. Meg had to wonder if that wasn't his real voice after all. Actually, a smile did cross D's lips.

"Good enough."

"Yes!" she cried, jumping for joy. She couldn't be certain whether it was purely a reaction to being able to save everybody now, or from her happiness at being able to stay with this man.

"From here on out, you're to do exactly as I say. Any resistance, and our contract will immediately be void."

"Understood," she said, and then she thought with surprise, *Was that actually me?* "So, what do we do now?"

"The Nobility have a facility in center of the island. That's where the villagers should be."

If that's what he says, it must be so, she thought. "Why'd they bring everybody out to the island, anyway?"

"It's where they conduct their experiments."

"Experiments? What kind?"

"Stay here," D said.

"Answer the question. What kind of experiments are they doing?"

"Dietary ones," the other voice suddenly said.

The remark was so cheeky, it made the blood rush to the girl's head.

"What's with that voice? Is it ventriloquism? Are you screwing around with me? I'll remind you, I'm your employer!"

"We have a contract."

For a heartbeat Meg was stuck for an answer, but a second later she exploded. “It’s canceled! Null and void! Null and void! Who’d hire a snooty Hunter like you? Fine! I’ll rescue ’em all on my own, just you wait and see!”

She gnashed her teeth at him before walking off, but with her third step her knees buckled. Limply collapsing, she then clutched both hands to her abdomen and murmured dolefully, “So hungry.”

Meg hadn’t had anything to eat since leaving the village. Her throat was parched, too. She couldn’t even stand like this, let alone fight.

There was the sound of hoof beats coming up behind her. As the cyborg horse passed by Meg, a pack of portable rations like travelers carried landed in her lap. She looked up in astonishment to find D astride the steed and already a good fifteen feet away. He must’ve brought the horse over in his boat.

However, she cried out, “Wait just a minute!” and got to her feet.

The cyborg horse had already broken into a gallop.

“Come on, wait! Take me with you. You’d just leave a woman in a place like this? And you call yourself a man!”

Her words bounced in vain off the black back of the rider, and his raiment melted into the inky darkness. An intense feeling of regret churned in the girl’s heart.

“Was I supposed to wait here? No, that won’t do. I’ll find everybody and save ’em, sure as I live. But first—”

The stouthearted girl who’d wiped away her regret with resolve sat down on the spot and tugged the string on the ration pack. In three seconds, a chemical heat pack warmed the entire thing. Taking off the cover and setting it down, she found the tray-shaped compartments filled with steaming stew, fruit and vegetable pastes, and bread. Though it might not exactly be delicious, it was guaranteed to be nutritious and filling.

Before taking a mouthful of stew from the included spoon, Meg gazed off into the depths of the darkness where the exquisite rider and his steed had vanished and stuck out her tongue. Or she intended to, but then she stopped. She would never dishonor him. He was the very embodiment of teenage dreams, something that would always evade her grasp no matter how hard she might try to catch it, but even knowing that she couldn’t help wanting it.

II

When Meg awoke the sun was already high, and she sprinted through the forest. An almost imperceptible fog went with her. D had said everybody was being held in a Noble facility, and that it was at the

center of the island.

"D—! D—! D—! Oh, you pain!"

Try as she might to forget him, the detestable Hunter had planted himself firmly in the girl's head and didn't show the slightest signs of leaving. Even worse, he had the nerve to make her blood run hot.

"Would you just stop it?!"

"I'll stab you!"

"You're nobody. You're nothing, you know that?"

If anyone else had heard her running soliloquy they'd have wondered if she were right in the head, but in the end it was *he* who brought Meg back to her senses. She halted and her eyes blurred with tears at the memory of Toma, and in her heart the thought that she'd forgotten him so long made her so sick with herself she wanted to die.

"Just you wait, Toma. I'll avenge you for sure."

The girl was a regular fireball, but even she recognized that wasn't the sort of thing she'd normally need to say aloud. She could say it a million times, and it'd still just be an excuse.

When she realized as much, Meg broke off three branches and sharpened them into harpoons. By focusing her attention, she could forget D for a while, and she intended to permanently banish him from thought.

Meg was walking across level ground. The sun was high but vaguely hidden by fog. After walking for what she thought to be about thirty minutes, she saw something black up ahead. She quickly squatted down.

Though the Nobility couldn't walk in the light of day, the bothersome creatures they'd created could perform their duties even in sunlight.

She waited a little while, but there was no sign of anything moving. Working her nerve up again, Meg started forward. As she got closer she realized what she'd seen was apparently part of something massive buried in the ground.

The scenery had changed completely. The grass was gone, and now dirt was beneath her feet—though the dirt was trapped beneath a black, glassy substance.

"What's the story with this ground?" she murmured, taking in her surroundings.

On scattered spots around the harshly glinting plain, parts of some building or an enormous mechanism could be glimpsed, but Meg didn't recognize it. Her surroundings grew dim. At some point, she'd moved into the shadow cast by the object. Rising from the ground at

an angle, it reminded her of the tip of a weird skyscraper. It went fifty feet high, and had it been standing straight it probably would've reached over sixty. Due to its ash-gray surface it looked like rock, but on closer inspection it was actually metal. Meg touched the surface, which had violent pits and bulges all over it. Its rough texture and appearance called to mind the glassy ground. That these were traces of a place struck by a few million degrees of heat was something beyond Meg's comprehension.

Being in this world of silence made Meg uneasy. Though she could look up and see the sun and birds winging across the sky, here alone she couldn't sense even the faintest signs of life. Even the strange happenings in the tunnel seemed a pleasant memory, but Meg gave her head a good hard shake to keep her mind from crumbling.

You've gotta get a grip on yourself. Be strong!

But even that was a painful thought.

A dull sound came from somewhere. As it spread, it had a ring to it that made her think of something low, heavy, and mysterious. Meg got the feeling something preposterous was happening.

"What?!" the girl murmured, and just then she distinctly heard the sound of iron shredding close at hand. When she turned and looked, a single line was burned into her eyes.

From its very top to where it was buried, the object split vertically —a line actually ran right down the center of it. The sound the girl had just heard was undoubtedly the screams of its welds tearing apart. The ground shook.

Not saying a word, Meg backed up.

The ground was being pushed away. The line up the object just kept growing wider. It was opening to either side. Pale electromagnetic waves flashed in the depths of the gap.

For the longest time, Meg felt like she was spellbound.

Now the gap had spread to more than six feet, and in its depths a section like a lustrous black cocoon could be seen. Something strange happened to the head portion of it. Though Meg couldn't see from where she was, a hole about six feet in diameter had opened in it. A pale human hand reached from the head of the cocoon. It only became apparent that the occupant was a woman when the arm was followed by the appearance of a head of luxurious black hair, graceful shoulders, and tantalizing breasts. Her face was raised and angled off to the right, and as it turned in the girl's direction, black hair billowed across it.

Hell, I'm better looking than she is, Meg thought.

The woman had the face of a rustic peasant girl, but the movements she made seemed to compensate for that. Skillfully she crept down the smooth surface of the cocoon, like a spider or some

kind of reptile. Her absent-minded expression, lacking even an iota of intelligence, shrouded Meg in a fog of fear.

The woman came down and stood on the ground, but perhaps she wasn't accustomed to that, because time and again she went down on all fours, until presently she got up jerkily.

"Oh, this is definitely not good," Meg said, hauling back with the harpoon in her right hand. The others were lashed together with a vine and slung across her back. Extending her left hand, she gauged the distance to the woman. She was confident she could respond to whatever movement the woman made. You had to be more than just fair at this to nail a fish leaping out of the water from the deck of rocking ship.

The woman started walking. With her first step she nearly stumbled, and with her second she was reeling. It was a nightmarish parody of walking that a marionette on broken strings might perform.

"Hold it right there!" the girl shouted.

The woman halted for an instant—then began walking again.

"Are you one of those old settlers? I came over from the same village. I'm here to save all of you!"

Meg looked into the woman's eyes—and gave up. Putting her strength into her right arm, she trained her eye on the woman's chest.

The woman suddenly vanished. When she leapt up with unbelievable speed, Meg's wooden harpoon pierced her through the left arm. The force of the impact stopped her for a moment, and then the woman bent back far. She righted herself, including the harpoon in her arm. And it wasn't just that she'd sprung back up. The harpoon sped forward, too.

Meg was aware that it'd pierced the left side of her chest. The girl lay flat on her back, and the woman sailed lightly down on top of her. Her mouth opened with a hiss. Incisors like ice picks were the last thing Meg saw before her consciousness was swallowed up by pitch blackness.

"That girl's gonna follow you for sure!" the hoarse voice was heard to say. "And just as sure, she's gonna run into them. Too bad she doesn't have a chance of making it through alive. How's that make you feel?"

"She chose her own path," D replied.

The young man's conclusions were quiet and cold, like a blade. If anyone had been there to hear it, it probably would've felt like fate.

"Oh, I see. By the way, the fog's gotten oddly heavy."

The area around the steed and its rider was bleached white. He, too, was out in the middle of a plain.

"Can't make out our position from the 3D sensors or the tracking satellites. But this fog . . ."

“Are you trying to say it acts as a sensor that wouldn’t let even an insect slip through?” the Hunter asked.

“Probably. Either they’ll be lying in wait for us, or they’ll come after us. No matter which, it’s all the same to you, I suppose.”

Even the head of the cyborg horse had disappeared from D’s field of view.

“Stop!” the hoarse voice demanded. It came from the vicinity of D’s left hand, which gripped the reins.

The horse stopped. That was all. There was no change in D. Not the slightest hint of murderous intent tinged the world of white.

“What is it?” D inquired.

“Nothing. It’s just dangerous.”

D looked overhead, with the palm of his left hand shading his face from the sun. It was an expanse of blue sky. Yet his surroundings were a thick sea of fog.

“So *that’s* it,” the left hand said, sounding satisfied. “Mind your horse’s position. A long time ago, I heard about a way of killing sort of like this.”

“From whom?”

Apparently this was a sensitive subject, and the hoarse voice fell silent for a moment before saying, “Through the grapevine.” Suddenly, in a low, intense tone it added, “See, here it comes!”

The black horse tore into the ground at almost the same time a stark light filled the world. Waves of heat struck the rider’s back.

“Left!”

As his steed touched back down to the ground, D pulled on the reins. Hooves kicked up the soil. The steed’s front legs creaked from the load this rough handling placed on them.

D shot a quick glance over to the first spot he’d landed. Beyond the fog—there was nothing. There was no ground, and even that *space* didn’t exist. He could sense only nothingness.

D or not, there was no saying what might’ve happened to the rider had he stayed there.

As if looking for the answer to that, the white light flashed. If D had looked up, he might’ve witnessed a beam of light shooting from where the sun shone in the blue sky. There must’ve been a device with an amplifying lens or something similar somewhere between the Earth and the sun that could collect a portion of the sun’s rays and focus them into a beam the width of a human hair. At a heat of several hundred million degrees, the beam could actually make the ground boil.

And after the Hunter’s miraculous escape, a cruel trap had awaited him.

Dodging a third shot and then a fourth, the rider had just broken

into a gallop when the hoarse voice cried out, “Oh, no!”

Both horse and rider pitched madly to the right, and they were swallowed up by the swirling fog.

III

“He is slain,” said a voice that seemed to flow across the fog.

Here, too, the world was tinged a milky white. Aside from the fog, everything was shadows. Something like pillars, something like stairs, something like statues—all colored by a world of stagnant milk, as if to eternally shield themselves from the flow of time. That was where the words had sprung into being.

At the same time, a shadowy figure moved in the vicinity of where the voice had come from. That movement stopped dead when another voice was heard. It came from ahead of the shadowy figure—from the depths of the swirling fog. Though the voice was that of a young woman, it had a ring of time to it like that of a crone.

“And you can prove this?”

“He fell into the ‘nothingness.’ No mathematical construct can exist there.”

“Anything swallowed by something that doesn’t exist also ceases to exist?”

“Correct, Your Grace,” replied a vibrant voice which in sound at least seemed far older than that of the woman.

“And what is Gildea doing?”

“At present, he’s in the medical center recovering from his wounds. It must’ve been quite an incredible opponent to injure him. It is said Gildea’s strength wasn’t sufficient to remove the blade stuck in his throat, and that he had to activate a device in the medical center before he finally extricated it. The gravity controller was bearing him back here on autopilot when he lost consciousness.”

After a short time had passed, the woman said, “His opponent was a dhampir?” She seemed to be putting the question to herself.

“In all likelihood. And far and away more skilled than the average one.” The vibrant voice paused there for a moment. Clearly the speaker was gauging the listener’s reaction.

Presently, he continued, “On regaining consciousness, Gildea said his opponent had mentioned your name, even going so far as to inquire as to your condition. Are you familiar with his foe?”

“I know him,” she replied in the same tone she’d used up until now. However, the intensity of the emotion that swayed there would be evident to any who heard her.

“What manner of foe is this?”

“His name is—D.”

“Oh! In that case—”

A horrible sense of turmoil came from the figure in the fog. It was on account of that that he stopped in midsentence.

“When we and the island were destroyed, you didn’t get a chance to meet the man.”

“Ah, but now I may finally encounter him? Why would this D come to the island, though? Is he not most likely in someone’s employ?”

“Seven days ago I rose again. It may well be that he became aware of my resurrection and came here.”

“And how would he become aware of that?”

“What do you know of him?”

This time, as the woman’s voice streamed out it suggested she couldn’t read the vibrant one’s mind.

“Well—nothing.”

“In truth?”

“Yes, your grace,” the man replied, his voice carrying a fear unimaginable from his tone up to that point.

After a short pause, the woman continued, “You said he was slain, did you not?”

“Yes, your grace,” he replied in a tone of relief, not due to the woman’s question itself, but because she’d bothered to ask.

“For the D I know, that simply isn’t possible.”

“We made use of the solar cannon and the ‘nothingness.’”

“You could crush the whole Milky Way and it still would be for naught.”

The man didn’t know what to say to that.

“Prepare the light shielder. I shall be going out.”

“But that’s—”

“You’re giving me a look as if I were going to help him, aren’t you, Danae?”

“As you say, your grace.”

“Even if that were the case, you could do nothing to stop me. The least you could do is keep me company.”

A movement took place in a world of silence. The depths of the fog stirred. Another shadowy form had passed beside the man called Danae. A scant amount of light swayed by the figure’s chest. Even Danae halted. One fog eddied with the other, collided, then separated again. Even after the shadowy figures melted away into the milky whiteness, their respective fogs continued an unending feud.

On realizing that she was being shaken roughly, the girl awoke.

"You okay?"

A heavily bearded face Meg couldn't recall seeing before was peering down at her. She leapt up in a hurry. Something ran down her cheek. Sweat. It was strangely hot.

"Who are you?"

"They call me d'Argent. I'm a survivor of those who came over to the island one hundred seven years back."

Meg stared at the man and nearly forgot to breathe. She could understand if he were the descendant of somebody who'd crossed over a century ago—but he claimed to actually be one of the settlers.

Now, that's strange, was her first thought. He was too young to be one of them. Under all that beard, his face looked like that of a man about twenty, give or take a year. Then, it suddenly hit her. If what he was saying was true, could it be that he was a Noble—or some other creature that didn't age?

More than the hand she involuntarily raised to the nape of her neck it was the change in Meg's expression that d'Argent noticed. Grinning wryly, he said, "Oh, you're a sharp one to put this face and the bit about one hundred seven years ago together. I was subjected to the Nobility's experiments. All the others died, I think, and I alone was spared. Ever since, I haven't aged. Just to be perfectly clear, I'm not a victim of the Nobility. If I were, you wouldn't have been safe this long."

Meg nodded. There were no wounds on her neck. And although they were presently in what seemed to be some sort of cellar, strong light filtered in. It was daytime.

"Then that woman . . ."

The image of the reptilian woman who she could only imagine was a victim of the Nobility filled Meg's mind. She hadn't done anything to the girl?

"Did you save me? Was there anybody around me?"

"No," d'Argent said, shaking his head as he reflected. "I found you by that huge machine. That area used to be another testing facility. But now, as you saw, it's a wasteland. You were lying there alone."

"Is it okay to go outside?"

"Sure," d'Argent responded with a slightly suspicious nod, perhaps having gleaned from Meg's demeanor that she had some important business.

The terrain all around was jagged and rocky. It seemed terribly hot there, and gas jetted from a number of spots.

Meg looked up at the sun. From its angle and the way it was shining, more than an hour had passed since *that incident*—but not two. When she turned around and asked him, d'Argent told Meg about forty minutes had passed since he'd found her and brought her there.

That being the case, what'd happened during the other fifty minutes or so?

Meg asked about the woman.

"I think she was a test subject," d'Argent replied.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Apparently before we came here, other people had been brought over to the island. They went crazy as a result of the experiments conducted on them, and they were expulsed."

"What's an X-pulse?"

"It means they were banished, actually."

"Well, why didn't you say that, then? Don't go using fancy words with me."

"Pardon me."

Eyeing the man intently, Meg said, "I don't get the sense you're a fisherman. What, then?"

Laughing at the way she'd framed her question, d'Argent replied, "I'm an elementary school teacher."

"I see. But that was a hundred years ago, right? Don't be acting all uppity just because I'm a fisher, okay?"

Meg punctuated that with a smile. Even when she had huge arguments with other villagers, that was the wonder drug that always reconciled them immediately.

"What brings you here?"

His query was natural enough, and in response Meg looked up at the sun again and said, "Don't suppose I could tell you along the way, could I? I'm here to save the villagers who were brought over to the island. If you've been here for a hundred years, you must know where everything is. I'll make it worth your while. Help me out."

"Sorry, but no."

The man's reply struck Meg so coldly it took her a moment to say, "What? Why not?"

"I really like it here on the island. Thanks to the Nobles' furnace, this area's always warm, and there's no shortage of things to eat. Plus, if I were to go home, everyone I knew is dead now."

"There might be others around like you!"

"I've never met one, but even if there were, they'd think like I do."

"With your help, a lot of folks might be saved. And you still won't do it?"

"Sorry."

"Fine, then!" Meg said, utterly giving up. "Thanks for all you did. And good-bye. Just tell me the lay of the land in the center of the island. And I have one more thing to ask of you."

"What's that?"

"Don't you ever go telling anyone you're a teacher again."

Returning to the cellar, d'Argent explained the geography of the area, drawing a map with plant extracts on some sort of animal hide.

"Give me a little of your food. I'll pay you back later."

Saying nothing more, Meg left the rocky area about twenty minutes later. She was incredibly angry, but she pushed forward on foot to keep her temper in check.

The rocky terrain extended for more than half a mile in all directions according to what d'Argent had told her and what was written on the map. There was fog, as usual. But the odor that assailed her nose, like that of sulfur, must've come from the jets of gas all over the place.

Just then, from the far reaches of a lumpy plain that seemed to go on forever, a black speck flew into the air.

In the Name of Science

chapter 5

I

What was coming wasn't flying down from the sky, but rather it'd kicked off the ground far in the distance. And it ripped through the wind like a stone, landing just ten feet ahead of Meg. It made no sound. The wind struck Meg head-on. Perhaps it'd reduced its own mass to zero just before touching down, for as soon as it landed it seemed to stop dead.

Meg's reaction was swift. Leaping back about a yard, she had presence of mind enough to level a harpoon at it. Her will to fight was dwindling rapidly.

"What the hell is this?"

It looked for all the world like a beetle. Horns jutted from its head like radar, its limbs were covered with thorny barbs, and its body gleamed like iron. However, it was a hundred times the size of those to be found on trees back in the village's forest, and its tremendous proportions weren't the only thing strange about it. Its lower half was clad in tattered trousers, and a wool muffler was wound about its head. The latter was also threadbare, looking as if even a child could tear through it with the slightest application of strength. There was no reason for an insect to wear clothes. Strangest of all was how the beetle stood on two legs.

Could it be this is a person? Meg thought, gazing at its muffler-shrouded head. Through a gap in the fabric she saw a pair of eyes. Accustomed to spotting fish through rough seas, fishermen had keen eyesight. The shock went right through Meg like an arrow. Those weren't the eyes of an insect. They belonged to a human being.

"Okay—just wait a minute. Who the hell are you?" she asked in spite of herself.

As if in response, the bug squealed. At the same time, it stepped forward.

Meg didn't give an inch. A certain feeling made her stay right where she was.

"Who are you?!"

She let the harpoon fly. Its target was the left side of the insect's head. The harpoon pierced the end of the muffler and tore it free. The rest of it went off in the breeze with no particular difficulty.

"Just as I thought."

Meg's words were directed at the face of a middle-aged man, now exposed to the fog and sunlight. With bronzed, leathery skin that the girl knew at a glance to be that of a fisherman, he had rough-hewn features, but not those of anyone she recognized.

Was he one of the settlers, too? She turned around. *D'Argent would know*, Meg thought.

Darkness engulfed her. Sharp pains shot through her back and shoulders. The barbs on the insect's limbs had sunk into her.

"Let me go!"

Meg grabbed another harpoon and used it to strike at the insect's limbs. If she tried moving her body, the barbs would only tear at her.

"What are you doing?! You've gotta be human inside that head of yours!"

After glaring at it, the girl realized she was wasting her breath. What filled the man's eyes was stark-naked madness. The instant she saw a hint of gladness suffuse his face and saliva drip from the corner of his mouth, Meg thrust the harpoon into the insect's abdomen. The beetle's scream resembled the cry of a cicada.

The spell was broken. Meg made a mad dash for d'Argent's cellar. She'd also remembered to pull her harpoon back out. After all, she was low on weapons.

With the sense of balance a fisherman gained from the swaying of a boat, the girl raced through the bumpy region of rocks without incident, until the entrance to d'Argent's cellar finally came into view. Relief welled up in Meg's heart—and withered again suddenly. A beetle had landed right in front of her. Though it also had a muffler wrapped around it, the state of the hair protruding from the wrappings and the shredded skirt told her it was a woman.

"So, he wasn't the only one?!" the girl said to herself.

The beetle with a female head came at the girl to grab her.

No sooner had Meg leveled her harpoon than she heard, "Hit the deck!"

Diving off to the right, she hugged against the rocky ground. Her eyes never left the insect.

It seemed as if a wad of light sank into its back. The insect's body glowed, turning crimson. No doubt that was due to the flames that burned it down to its base molecules.

"Don't move!" d'Argent shouted from the entrance to his cellar. His right arm was extended, sheathed to the elbow in an armored gauntlet of what looked to be bronze, and from the wrist there projected a cylinder more than an inch in diameter. It glowed crimson.

Three more wads of light flew from it in rapid succession. Two insects burst into fiery red, but the third shot missed. Spreading the wings on its back, the third insect flew over d'Argent's head with

terrific speed and snatched him up with evil clawlike limbs.

D'Argent paused in his slaughter. He was too close to it.

The former teacher had been lifted about three feet off the ground when a harpoon came whistling through the wind to pierce the insect's abdomen. As the creature doubled over, d'Argent managed to leap free of it, backed away a few steps, and then reduced the beetle twitching on the ground to charred, smoking remains.

Looking at Meg, he asked, "You okay?"

"I was gonna ask you the same thing," she replied.

D'Argent seemed sullen, but his expression quickly twisted and he clutched his back. He'd hit it when he fell.

Running over, Meg said, "Are you all right?"

"I'll survive."

"Good. So, what is that thing?"

She was pointing at the bronze weapon.

"It's called a 'hand of destruction.' I stole it from the Nobles' castle. It can vaporize a huge boulder with just one shot. This is what keeps monsters from hanging around here."

"Quite the item you've got there," the girl said, sounding impressed. Turning around, she asked, "And what are these things?"

"I'll explain. Let's head back inside."

"No way. Do it here and now. Don't have the time to waste. I've gotta get going soon."

"You're just a regular spitfire, aren't you?" d'Argent said in amazement. And then he looked at Meg with an oddly calm expression and continued, "There was one like you in our group. Wait a minute. I'll go get ready."

As the man gave a nod and turned around, Meg said to him anxiously, "Hold up. Get ready for what?"

"I'm going, too. I've had a change of heart," he replied over his shoulder without even halting.

"Why now?"

"Don't badger me about it. It might change right back."

It was five minutes later that d'Argent reappeared from the cellar. A leather backpack was strapped to his back, and he was riding a strange contraption. It was a metallic plate three feet square with a control stick attached. Simple and elegant in design, it was apparently one of the Nobility's items.

Zipping across the rocky terrain without a sound, it halted right in front of Meg. It had neither the smell of fuel to it nor the rumble of an engine.

"One of the Nobles' things, I take it?"

"That's right."

"You go and swipe that from 'em, too?"

“No. It happened to go missing when one of their underlings left it parked.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“That’s a debate that’ll have to wait until later. Well, hop on behind me and grab onto my waist.”

“Can it fly through the air?”

“No, it can’t manage that. But it can take any road, no matter how bad, without stopping.”

“It doesn’t even have wheels, so how does it work?”

“I’m no Noble. But it seems to allow us to control a power that’ll push us along across the surface.”

“You don’t say. Can you drive it okay?”

“Sure,” d’Argent replied. “It’s amazingly simple. Why, a child of five could master its operation in an hour.”

“Show me how to do it later.”

“No problem.”

Damn! Meg thought on realizing the surrounding scenery was streaking by like arrows. The rocky terrain vanished. A stand of trees was drawing nearer. She shrieked, and they were already into the forest. Another shriek. There was a gigantic rock dead ahead.

We’re gonna crash! she thought, but by that point the rock was already behind them.

The girl found their vehicle incredible.

“You’re really good at this,” Meg remarked with deep admiration.

D’Argent shook his head from side to side.

“It’s not me. The vehicle avoids obstacles on its own.”

“Huh?! But I didn’t even feel it swerve at all!”

“That’s a Noble vehicle for you.”

“I see,” the girl replied, but she really didn’t understand at all. She wondered why the same species who could make such wonderful devices would drink human blood. And she questioned why humans couldn’t make such incredible things.

No sooner had she formed these questions than the wind slammed into the pair mercilessly, then stopped flat. The two of them were halted, as if frozen.

“What’s wrong?” Meg asked.

The vehicle spun to the right. It turned 180 degrees.

The girl finally noticed that they were in a section of ruins. From between green bushes and copses, crumbling ramparts and stone walls could be glimpsed, and the ground was spread with snaking paths of smooth stone. About fifteen or twenty feet down one of these paths, almost out of view, was what might’ve been part of a staircase. Beside the stairs, a pair of feet jutted out. The black boots were intricately tooled, speaking volumes about the nature of the one who wore them.

“A Noble?” Meg murmured. “But he’s still got his legs. Even though the sun’s still high in the sky . . .”

“There are some who could walk in the light of the sun.”

“What?”

She felt as if her whole body were being wrung out like a towel. Nobility who could walk in the light of day? Impossible!

“We’ll dispose of him,” d’Argent fairly groaned.

Shock shook Meg out of her numbness.

“I’m not exactly sure, but he seems to have either collapsed or to be sleeping. I’ll drive this through his heart.”

At some point the man had pulled out a stake of rough wood, which he now gripped in his right hand.

The vehicle landed. D’Argent was the first to reach the boots. Peeking around from behind him, Meg widened her eyes.

Slumped back against the marble stairs was a Noble in a crimson cape. Blond-haired, he had a pale face that was staring up at the pair. The left side of his chest was stained with blood. His wide blue eyes pierced those of Meg.

“I remember you. You’re Lord Danae, aren’t you? Do you remember me?” d’Argent asked, his voice quaking with rage. The tremors echoed from a ghastly past.

II

The Noble’s thin lips twisted. He’d smiled.

“The likes of a human? Would you . . . remember the face . . . of a fly you swatted yesterday?”

After saying that in fragments as cold as ice, he spat up blood.

“I’ll see to it you never forget!” d’Argent cried, raising the stake with both hands.

But Meg drove her shoulder into his waist as hard as she could. Incredibly enough, the man didn’t offer much resistance, being thrown ten feet and falling among the roots of a stand of trees.

“Wh-what the hell?!”

The man immediately sprang right back up, waves of shock and anger washing over Meg from every inch of him.

“Noble or not, you can’t just kill a helpless foe!”

“The hell I can’t!” d’Argent shouted, mouth open as wide as it would go. “If you only knew what this bastard did to us—I didn’t say anything about that earlier. It was so terrible, I didn’t want to think about it. But if you’re gonna try and stop me, I’ll tell you all about it. It’ll keep you up at night!”

“Like hell you will! I didn’t come out here to hear about that. At any rate, I’m telling you you can’t go killing a defenseless person!”

“Goddamned idiot!” the former teacher snarled, raising the stake and charging forward.

“Knock it off!”

Meg’s body moved of its own accord. The instant she’d crouched down, the teacher was on her back. She sprang back up. Her timing was exquisite. D’Argent was sent flying over to the remains of the staircase, pieces of which crumbled to the ground.

“Damn it all!” the man bellowed, but after pulling himself back up, he stopped dead.

“What the—?!”

Meg, too, was motionless, with her eyes bugged.

Lord Danae was behind d’Argent with his hand around the man’s throat and a well-attended nail pressing into the former teacher’s flesh. The nail had been sharpened like a blade. It would no doubt open d’Argent’s throat with a single swipe.

Despair spread across the face of the former teacher. However, the finger was taken away unexpectedly, and Danae gave d’Argent a shove from behind. Even gravely wounded, the Nobleman possessed monstrous strength—and d’Argent landed face-first at Meg’s feet some fifteen feet away.

“Why’d you help me?” Meg inquired, and she noticed her own voice sounded terribly calm.

A thin, cynical smile slid across Danae’s lips.

“Soon I shall be no more. There’s little point in taking any humans with me.”

“Anyway, thank you. Why don’t you show me your wound.”

Danae’s smile grew even more cynical.

“Could it be you actually intend to save me?”

“’Never turn your back on the injured,’ Dad always told me. ‘Even if it’s a Noble’—no, I made that part up.”

To d’Argent, who was looking up at her in astonishment, Meg said, “Simmer down already. There’s nothing we can do to him, and you know it.”

The declaration drove into him like a knife. Apparently he’d dropped the stake when he’d hit the stairs.

“Maybe that’s the case with *you*.”

Diverting his loathing gaze, d’Argent lay spread-eagled on the ground.

Walking over to Danae, Meg examined his wound.

“It’s right over your heart! I’m surprised you’re not dust already.”

“I have a rather unique physiology. My heart is far to the right instead of in the center. He didn’t know that. Instead of finishing me off, he went off in pursuit of another.”

“By ‘he,’ you mean the man in black—D?” Meg asked.

Danae nodded. His look then became one of dawning comprehension, and he said, “You know him, do you? Your expression says that his recollection makes your heart throb sadly.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, you big dummy!”

But even as she denied it, Meg felt her cheeks flush. That face, like a gorgeous winter moon, had begun to emit a glow she couldn’t contain. Somehow or other, she had to put it out.

“But enough about that,” she said. “Where are the folks you brought over here?!”

“At the castle. It’s about two miles due north of here. Do you intend to go there?”

“Of course,” Meg replied, tearing off one of her sleeves and pressing it to Danae’s chest. She continued, “I thought they said the only ways to destroy Nobles were to stab ’em through the heart or cut their heads off. If he missed the kill shot, how come you won’t stop bleeding?”

“His sword is special. He’s undoubtedly a dhampir.”

“A dhampir?!”

Meg had learned in school that they were the half-breed children of humans and Nobility. He would have his Noble blood to thank for his lovely countenance and impressive physique.

For some reason Meg felt her mind drifting away, but one remark from Danae brought her back to reality.

“However, he is no ordinary dhampir.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“In the eight millennia I’ve been alive, I have slain hundreds of dhampirs. However, not one of them could match his eerie aura, his skill with a blade, or his beauty. Rather, they weren’t even fit to lie at his feet. He looms as far above them as the heavens are above the earth.”

The way Danae’s expression was melting with rapture was something that left Meg half stunned, but half understanding. This was a foe who could deal death to you and still you would be unable to keep from singing his praises. Yes, that was precisely the sort of man he was.

“I sealed him away in a space that didn’t exist. No one, not even a Noble among Nobles, had ever escaped it. However, Duchess Mizuki didn’t believe it. She said that D of all people wouldn’t be slain by the likes of me. We got aboard the light-shielder and headed for the spot where I had contained him. And there we learned that he had escaped. You can’t comprehend how miraculous that is. But as we hastened back to the castle, we encountered him. Though Duchess Mizuki made good her escape, I was defeated by him and left to let death slowly creep over me.”

“That’s what you get for throwing down with such a looker!” Meg said, the words coming from the bottom of her heart. “But you survived, so you’ve gotta have a pretty mean streak of luck. Try hard enough, and you might yet get to go on living. Say, isn’t there any other way to get you to stop bleeding?”

Danae gazed at Meg with an intrigued look in his eyes, and it didn’t waver when he said, “There is one way.”

“What’s that?”

“I want you to let me drink your blood.”

Meg—and the very air—froze.

As the girl stood there dumbfounded and paralyzed, in her place d’Argent shouted, “Like hell! Don’t listen to him!”

Of course, from the very start Meg had no intention of doing that. But something about Danae’s gaze piqued her interest. His request hadn’t been made in jest. He was completely sincere, and seemed to be searching for something.

“Just what do you mean by that? Did you actually think I’d agree to that?”

“I wouldn’t drink the blood directly from your body. If you were to merely nick the tip of your finger and let a drop or two fall into my mouth, you wouldn’t become my servant.”

“Don’t do it. It’s obvious he’s lying. If a Noble drinks your blood . . .”

Meg nodded. D’Argent was right. Though she’d never actually seen it take place, she could well imagine what happened when you let one of the Nobility drink your blood, no matter what stipulations might’ve been made. Anyone who’d agree to that request would have to be out of their mind.

“Will you swear on the honor of the Nobility not to do anything to us?” she asked. “If you will—then okay.”

“I swear it.”

“Meg?!”

“Not another word out of you. I must be out of my mind.”

Drawing her knife, Meg made a small slice at the tip of her left index finger. A bead of blood rose on it.

“I’m gonna shake it from here, okay?”

“Of course.”

Aiming for the mouth of the undead who was at death’s door, Meg shook her hand. She couldn’t tell whether she’d managed to get it in or not. However, before she could draw another breath, Danae got to his feet. The malicious smile that spread across his face made the girl freeze with horrid regret. On seeing that, the venom faded from Danae’s smile.

“What?”

“Be at ease. I made a promise to myself. In repayment for this—ah yes, I shall guide you to the castle.”

“Really?! Yes!” Meg exclaimed, blinking time and again. Her head was swimming. Apparently that was what happened when a person was that relieved. “That’s great. But that vehicle can’t carry three people. What’ll we do?”

Danae’s eyes turned toward d’Argent.

“We have no need of this incompetent.”

“To hell with you. I came out here because I was worried about her. And you call yourself a Nobleman! You might’ve pulled the wool over the girl’s eyes, but you don’t fool me!”

D’Argent slipped his hand into the backpack, which he’d set down on the ground. What he pulled out glinted with the dappled sunlight.

“Don’t!” Meg shouted, and she was about to try to stop him, but she halted when the barrel of the weapon turned her way.

It was the same “hand of destruction” that’d made human-headed beetles disappear in the blink of an eye.

“I’ve heard that so long as a Noble doesn’t get a stake or blade through the heart, he can be burnt down to ashes and still regenerate,” d’Argent remarked. “Only, it takes time to come back. And while that’s happening, I’ll pop your half-formed heart.”

“Do you think you can make it to the castle without me?”

“Yeah, I think so. Hell, that was what we intended from the start. Just so you know, thanks to the experiments you folks did on me, I don’t age anymore. So I’m not afraid of anything now.”

A sneer skimmed across the Nobleman’s lips.

“You seem to be confusing immortality with indestructibility. Simply because you don’t age, it doesn’t follow that you cannot die.”

Danae’s eyes gave off a red light. It formed twin beams that pierced D’Argent’s shoulders. The immortal reeled backward with a scream, his shoulders issuing flames and black smoke.

“You stop it, too!” Meg cried, standing between the two of them with her hands extended. “You know what happens when a human fights a Noble. So stop bullying those weaker than you!”

“This man made an attempt on my life when I was injured—however, I shall respect the wishes of my savior.”

Danae’s cape whipped around. He had started over to the vehicle on foot.

“What about him?” the girl asked.

“I believe you said there wasn’t room for three people,” the Nobleman replied.

“In that case, go by yourself. I won’t be going, either.”

Gazing at Meg with eyes so cold she thought her blood would freeze solid, Danae said, “You would protect us both, then? A fellow human might praise you for your philanthropy, but I would call it being noncommittal and ineffectual. You cannot use a knife or fork when you have a bouquet of flowers in either hand!”

“Your kind doesn’t need them anyway, do they? Not since you’re a bloodsucking monster, right?”

Damn my big mouth, the girl thought, but it was too late. Danae’s eyes glowed red. In an instant, Meg prepared to meet her fate from the hateful beams. However, the deadly light wasn’t unleashed, and Danae’s eyes quickly returned to normal.

“You’re strong-willed for a human girl. But this is the last time I shall feel any obligation to you. If you can carry him on your back, the man may accompany us.”

“Just you leave it to me.”

Meg raced over to d’Argent, who was down on his knees in agony. She whispered in his ear, “So, how much do you weigh?”

“Not really sure . . . A little over one hundred twenty pounds . . . probably.”

“In that case, I think I’ll manage.”

Back in the village, she’d carried crates of fish weighing one hundred thirty or even one hundred fifty pounds.

With grunts and groans and no small effort she managed to get d’Argent on her back and stand behind the Nobleman as he held the vehicle’s control stick.

“What are you doing?” Danae said to her.

“Huh?”

“Wrap your arms around my waist,”

“Er, sure,” Meg said, complying sheepishly.

Her left wrist struck something hard.

“Does that intrigue you?” the Nobleman inquired in an amused tone.

“Yes.”

The scenery began slowly flowing past them.

Danae took something out and showed it to Meg over his shoulder. A blue candle burned in a glass case about a foot long and two inches in diameter. The aroma that crept into her nostrils was the sort that made a person want to sigh.

“It’s ‘time-bewitching incense.’ So long as it burns, day is transformed into night.”

As he put it away, the scenery began to dwindle behind them at ever greater speed.

III

D advanced through the forest on foot.

“Well, you went and lost our means of transport, you big dope.”

“You’re handsome and all, but you’re kinda lacking. What are we supposed to do when you put down the servant but let the boss get away?”

“At this rate, we could keep going for a century and still not get out of the forest. I hold you responsible.”

The hoarse voice grumbled a litany of complaints from the vicinity of the Hunter’s hip, but after a while it seemed to be crushed, a shriek of pain rang out, and it grew quiet. However, it seemed to keep remembering, returning time and again with more gloom and doom.

As they were going on through a succession of trees and grass that seemed to know no end, they’d encountered two of the enemy. Battling the master of the “light-spear eyes,” D had deflected the beams back at him with the blade of his sword and narrowly managed to stab the Nobleman through the heart, but the other one had

escaped. In part that was the fault of the cyborg horse, which had been pierced through the barrel by the light spears, but aside from D and one other, no one knew that the Hunter had miraculously permitted the escape.

"Ever since you announced we were going over to the island, I've had a bad feeling. Duchess Mizuki Dandorian—now there's an accursed name. Especially where you're concerned!"

"Duchess? What about the duke?" D asked. Perhaps it was on account of the fog that still clung to him that his steely voice seemed to waver just a bit.

"You really don't remember, do you?" the hoarse voice asked back in a stunned tone. "Out of all your bloody battles, that's the one fight pulled out of your memories, eh? Maybe it's a spell the duke put on you out of jealousy, or it could be just simple amnesia—no, if it were amnesia, it'd have to mean *you-know-who*. Now listen good: To Duchess Dandorian, you were—gaaaaah!"

Fist still balled tightly, D hastened his pace.

It was strange the way this walk went. Out of the grass came snakes and insects and other creatures of indeterminate nature, and they followed along behind D. Among them were a number of species that could clearly move much faster than a person could walk. Nevertheless, they didn't catch up to D. The Hunter's gait was, to all appearances, just at normal speed. He didn't run at all. Yet those that followed him only fell farther and farther behind. Before long, all those in his wake had been lost, and D suddenly halted.

About ten yards up ahead, there stood a young woman wearing a deep purple dress. Her face was so lovely any man would be paralyzed at the first sight of her, and she cast a faint shadow in the dappled sunlight.

From the Hunter's loosening fist the hoarse voice jeered, "There, you see that? You might've forgotten, but she hasn't. My, my, my. She got away once and came back for more."

D, the woman said. Not with her voice. Her lips merely trembled. "I've been waiting for you. Will you not turn around and leave now?"

"I'm here on business. Once it's settled, I'll leave."

"Once upon a time, I was slain by you, along with my husband. Would you do so again?"

"Over and over," the Hunter replied, "as long as you keep coming back. That's my job."

The wind swept across the woman's lovely visage. It was colored with grief.

Once more it blew. It was seething with hatred.

"If that is the case," she said, "I won't be reduced to dust a second time. I shall stop you and avert that fate."

D bounded, cutting the woman from the top of her head down to the crotch. What resistance the blade met traveled up it to his shoulder.

There was no woman.

"An illusion. But you probably knew that," the left hand said.

Not bothering to sheathe his blade, D spun to his right. The wind howled, and another wind collided with it. And where they met, sparks shot out. D's sword had locked together with another blade.

The man in the ash-gray cape had bandages all over his face and hands. The bandages were dirty, soaked with blood and pus.

"The duke," the left hand groaned. "Watch yourself. A man crazy with jealousy is a force to be reckoned with. But what a great couple they make, coming back to life together and everything!"

The two men leapt apart, and amidst pale blue streaks of light they changed their stances and the positions of their swords. The man—the duke—brought his sword far to the right, and for some reason he put his left palm out in front of his face. On the other side, D lowered the tip of his sword until it nearly scraped the ground and turned the blade ever so slightly to the left.

"We meet again, D!" the duke said in a voice like that of a ghost groaning from the depths of the earth. "When the island was restored, I wished to remain sleeping. Because I only wanted to forget everything. However, the revival project took no pity on me. Once again I saw my wife, and now I have encountered you. Oh, how I curse you, Sacred Ancestor. Being torn apart mentally and physically just once was more than enough for me."

The duke sounded as if blood were about to gush from his mouth. Or rather, that his words were plastered with gore. With the bright blood that gushed from his soul. It was that tone that kept D standing still. However, the body beneath those bandages and that cape was terribly weak, and his voice was thin and broken. He was in absolutely no condition to square off against D.

"You think he's unmanly, do you?" the hoarse voice said, and even it carried a morose tone. "That's a cry from his very soul. D, he was destroyed by your hand, and for all his pain he might've found peace in death. Yet the woman told him how she felt about you—and as if to end his own life, he challenged you and was destroyed. No doubt today is a gift to him from God. This time, be sure to nail his coffin shut."

D didn't move—nor did the duke. Each of them carried the ghost of a lovely woman on his back. Perhaps it was her hand that nudged D forward.

The Hunter's feet kicked off the ground ferociously, and the leap was timed perfectly so that the second D touched down again his

sword lashed out with a weight and keenness that surely should've sliced the duke's head in two. However, his blade cut empty air, and D staggered.

D's eyes were trained on the open palm of the duke's hand. On his palm alone pale flesh was exposed, and an eye had been scribed there with black lines. Its pupil was blazing red. It was unclear whether or not D noticed that, for an instant, his own staggering form burned there.

The duke closed his hand into a fist.

"As you can see, I suffer from an illness. When I first did battle with you, it had already gnawed me down to the bone. There are afflictions that even the full power of the Nobility's knowledge cannot cure. I was still suffering from it when I was destroyed. When I was resurrected of late, I was asked what should be done about my affliction. A cure was possible. However, if it were to remain, I would be given another power—the power to triumph over D. I chose the latter without hesitation."

The duke opened his left hand. D was still reflected in the eye scribed there.

"Just now, I have taken in everything about you. With this, I shall know your location no matter where you go. And I shall see your actions. And like so, I can also *prevent them.*"

He moved his left hand as if beckoning to D.

"Come," the duke said. "Come to me."

D stood there with his sword aimed at his opponent's eye, but his body shook for an instant. As if fighting some unseen force.

"Come."

D's right foot took a step forward.

"This can't—" the hoarse voice began, surprise suffusing its tone.

"Come."

D started to take a second step, but managed to stop himself.

"I should expect no less from the man who slew me. But how about —this?"

The duke hauled back his right hand. Drawn by invisible strings, D stepped forward—and the duke's sword pressed into the base of the Hunter's neck.

Fresh blood stained the sun-dappled air.

A Light from the Past
chapter 6

I

Anyone who knew D could well imagine the scene where a bloody mist hung in the air. However, the blood sprayed from the Hunter. Duke Dandorian's sword had quite clearly slashed D open from the right shoulder to the left lung. Anyone would've recognized that the fight was over. The proof of that was the way Dandorian radiated delight from every inch of his body—but rather than topple as he should've, D made a great bound.

"What?!"

As the duke stood there in the wide, haughty stance of a temple guardian, a stark flash sank into his chest. From midair D had hurled a rough wooden needle—however, the duke's shoulder quaked with laughter. Not surprisingly, D dropped to one knee when he landed on the grass some five yards away, and from there he saw something bizarre. The needle he'd hurled had stopped about four inches shy of the duke. Wrapped around it to halt its deadly flight were bandages steeped in blood and pus.

There was more than just one bandage covering Dandorian's body. His face, hands, feet, and torso were all bound in multiple strips, the ends of which weren't secured but fluttered in the wind. It was simple enough to see that two of them were wound about D's projectile, but in light of the speed with which it'd been traveling, that seemed impossible.

"These strips of cloth guard me from any and all attacks. A cloth fortress, if you will. Wait, D! Cease your pointless struggling, for I now come to tear you to pieces."

Perhaps the duke had entirely forgotten his deadly beckoning power now, but the eyes to be glimpsed from between the bandages gave off a blood light of hate and anticipation. Treading across the grass, the duke began his walk over to a foe dredged up from his past.

D didn't move from where he'd touched down, and the blood spilling from his shoulder struck the black earth and green grass like a veritable torrent, never stopping for a second. And now he got right to his feet.

The duke stopped in his tracks. He was stunned to see D's taste for battle hadn't waned in the least. The Noble's ungodly abilities to attack and defend gave him wholehearted confidence. Would the left

hand he extended toward D make another deadly beckoning to the bloodied Hunter?

Dandorian started to take another step forward, but his leg suddenly bent at an angle. Before he could fall lengthwise, a hair-raising cry of agony from the mouth beneath the bandages was broadcast to the world.

"This is too . . . Damnation . . . The time for battle . . . D, we'll meet—"

His voice cut out there, and the duke's body fell onto the grass. Or rather, it crumpled. By the look of things, all that remained there was a mound of clothes and bandages.

D pressed his left hand to his wound. Once the massive bleeding stopped, he went and stood over what the duke had shed. Lifting one of the bandages with the tip of his sword, he put it in the grip of his left hand.

"They're just regular bandages," the hoarse voice said. "But there's nothing normal about this pus and blood! I . . . geeeeeh!"

The strange voice made further retching sounds, and the left hand vomited up fluid. It wasn't blood, but rather clear, like glass.

"Cut me loose—Hurry!"

Before the hand could vomit a second time, D's blade flashed out. His left hand fell to the ground, where a human face quickly formed in its palm. Its features were twisted by horrible pain, and fluid gushed again from its nose and mouth.

In a voice like a death rattle, it wheezed, "Such . . . poison . . . For him . . . living must be . . . hell . . . He lives . . . to have his revenge on you . . . D . . . Him and his wife . . . both . . . need . . . to die!"

Then all five fingers clutched madly at the sky before unexpectedly going limp. And the face began fading from the palm.

Saying nothing, D picked up his left hand and tucked it in a pocket inside his coat. A faint darkness shrouded his body. The day was beginning to dim. Before long in one section of the forest where a stir from the push of darkness could be heard, a tall figure in black looked terribly solitary. D, now you are truly alone. Look down at your feet. You aren't even casting a shadow.

"How much longer?" Meg asked.

Danae replied, "Approximately ten minutes."

Though it looked as if he were working the vehicle's control stick, in truth his hand was merely resting on it. The vehicle was avoiding the trees and rocks ahead all on its own.

Meg was deeply impressed. She wondered if a vehicle like this that moved without touching the ground might not work on the seas as well. If it did, fishing would become remarkably easy. She could make trips out to the fishing ground and back or catch up to schools of

swift-fins quickly, and it would be easy enough to keep storm wyrms from ramming her craft.

"Girl," Danae said.

"I have a name. It's Meg."

"Very well, then—Meg. What brings you to the island?"

"I already told you. I'm here to rescue the folks you and yours snatched."

"That much I have heard. What I wish to know is the *real* reason."

"The real—?! I told you!"

Infuriated, the girl was just about to give the Nobleman a tongue-lashing when his words hit her like a physical blow.

"You wish to be immortal—am I wrong?"

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Meg exclaimed, adding that he was an idiot. "When the time comes, everyone gets weak and dies. That's normal and natural. When you're human, that's your fate. Just the thought of living forever gives me the willies."

"Gives you the willies?"

"It means it frightens me."

"Why is immortality frightening? It means living forever without pain or the fear of death!"

"I'm not afraid to die!" Meg snapped back. "Imagine day in and day out listening to the roar of the dark sea in the middle of the night. You get the feeling all the seas in the world are snarling out there. The roll and crash is fine. But then suddenly, one of them rolls way far away. And by one of them, I mean a portion of the world's seas is suddenly far off, like you'd think it'd gone to the ends of the earth, only you can be sure it hasn't vanished. Listen real close, and this time you'll hear it coming. Its roar creeps closer, murky, real murky, until you think, *Oh no, here comes the hell wave! This is the end of me and my village. This incredibly tall mountain of a wave is gonna swallow everybody and kill us.* You can't sleep. You're scared, so scared all night that when you're a little kid, you cling to your mother's breast. But when you're bigger, you lie in bed alone and cry. You don't ever wanna put out to sea again. You don't even wanna look at the sea. But the next day you've gotta go out in your boat. You've got no time for crying or daydreaming.

"And once you're out on the waves, it's hell beneath the ship's planks. You run into bore sharks that can poke a hole through an iron hull, krakens that are about a hundred times the size of this island, and dancer rays that whip up giant whirlpools. Have you ever seen the sky from the bottom of a whirlpool half a mile wide and twice as deep? When you do, you're not supposed to look at what's all around you. Bones and pieces of ships sucked down centuries ago are spinning around in those sheer walls of blue-black water. Even though the

skeletons have gone to pieces, their cave-like eyes meet ours and they call to us. *Come, come to us. Join us*, they say.

"Seven times Dad and me have looked up at the sky from the bottom of a whirlpool. Such a little spot of blue, but that's the world where we live. White clouds sailing by, and gulls flying around. I wanna get back there. I wanna live to see that sky again—and with that determination, I've made it back. And yet, you know, sometimes I'll suddenly think back on those whirlpools and kinda miss 'em. If one of those times the walls of water came crashing down, I could stay there under the water with all those bones, and that seems like it'd be a real happy life. I'm not afraid of death anymore. You get that? I think it'll be real easy, and peaceful. And going to the end of time without dying would just be exhausting!"

Meg had let all that out in one burst.

Danae fell silent.

That did the trick, she thought, but she was mistaken.

"In order to know death, you must know life. You merely long for death as a rejection of life."

He said it so matter-of-factly.

Meg bared her teeth, shouting, "I'm not running away from life, and I'm not tired, either. I don't need any monster telling me how it is!"

"Monsters we may be, but we were your masters. We made exhaustive studies of human beings, both your bodies and your psyches. Though I would not say everything was left entirely clear."

"Of course not. How could a Noble ever understand the human heart—"

The girl shuddered as she said the words, and at the end, they were punctuated by an impact.

Danae twisted his body around. Blood sprayed into the air. Stained red from the neck down, Meg screamed, and perhaps it was her cry that made the vehicle go crazy. Its unshakable glide went into disarray, and the vehicle crashed into a gigantic tree to their right.

Meg and d'Argent were pitched forward, sailing through the air. The girl knew they'd done two and half cartwheels before hitting the ground. Her right shoulder came to rest against something strangely soft. Meg's brain was numbed by the impact, and she waited to give it time to recover. A few seconds sufficed.

Turning around, she asked the groaning d'Argent if he was okay.

"I'm all right. Sure felt that, though."

"Hang in there. You're ageless and indestructible, after all."

"No, you heard what the Nobleman said. I just don't get any older. So, what happened?"

"The vehicle and Lord Danae got shot."

“Shot? By whom?”

“I don’t know. But when Lord Danae was sent flying, I heard a gunshot off in the distance. And we know our ride must’ve got hit, too, because of the way it spun all of a sudden.”

“A Noble, I guess, or one of their underlings. I’ve never seen them use firearms, though.”

“I think I might know who it was,” Meg said, helping d’Argent to his feet.

Just then, the ground trembled.

“Huh?”

A certain foreboding made the two of them stop cold, like they were made of iron. Their eyes dropped to their feet. The soft ground that’d spared them both looked for all the world like a normal expanse of dirt and grass. But it sank appreciably.

“You know, this looks like a trap,” Meg whispered to the former teacher. “It’s a pitfall for trapping enormous creatures. The earlier group of settlers must’ve made it. Any more weight than we’ve got on it now and we’re goners!”

The pair began slowly walking across it, bound for firmer ground.

“Just three more feet,” Meg told d’Argent. “Hang in there.”

“I know.”

With their next step there was a sound like something snapping, and the ground subsided massively. Feeling like her blood was about to freeze, Meg leapt.

The instant they touched down on solid ground, a scream rang out from d’Argent.

“Suck it up!” the girl shouted, turning around.

Their former location had been transformed into a bowl-like depression in the earth. It was swallowed up without a sound, leaving only a colossal hole.

II

As Meg stared down into it in disbelief, from beside her d’Argent asked, “So, it was a trap after all?”

“It sure was. Just look. The bottom of the pit has a bunch of stakes pointing up. We were gonna be impaled on ’em!”

Then she remembered something. Scanning their surroundings, she called out at the absolute minimum volume, “Lord Danae, are you okay?”

There was no reply.

“He was shot, but it’d take more than that to kill a Noble. I wonder if he’s lying low,” said d’Argent.

“I don’t know, but if *that thingy* is out of commission . . .”

Meg tried to envision their next move, but it didn't go very well. Under the present circumstances, an immortal without the use of either arm was about as useful as tits on a bull.

Maybe I should just leave him behind?

That upstart of an idea skimmed through her head, but was swiftly forgotten. Out in stormy weather, she'd let their catch flop back into the sea because she wasn't paying attention. *It's not my fault*, was how the train of thought started, and it had gotten all the way to *I never even wanted this job in the first place* when the fist struck her. Meg's father grabbed her and shook her bodily, saying, *Love it or hate it, if you're on the job, you gotta take responsibility for it. The world'll be more than happy to pile responsibilities on top of the ones you deserve. When it does, don't you dare run from 'em. Not even if it kills you. When you feel like calling it quits, that's when you've really gotta bite your tongue.* That was the first time her father had ever looked that scary to her, and the last.

"At any rate, we should hide," d'Argent said, and he too scanned in all directions. "If push comes to shove, don't you worry about me. Take off on your own."

Well, what do you know? He's braver than I thought, Meg mused.

"Because I'll do the same," the former teacher added.

So, you'd ditch your responsibilities, eh?

"Okay, I see," the girl replied, and then she heard the sound of something treading grass behind them.

"Over there!"

Meg dashed over to a gigantic tree, and she and d'Argent took cover behind a trunk that looked twice as large as they could get their arms around.

There hadn't been any road there to begin with. Anybody who'd walk through a world so choked with trees couldn't be considered normal.

The girl was poised with her harpoon.

The footsteps were coming from up ahead and off to the right, and seemed to run along a stand of trees.

"Psst," d'Argent said, gesturing to the weapon on his right arm. "Use this. A lousy harpoon won't do you any good."

"Who asked you? I've had nothing but harpoons to get me this far."

"You were just lucky."

"Screw you!" she snapped at him, but just then a figure she recognized pushed his way out of the high grass.

"You?!"

The hirsute giant had no trouble catching Meg's voice.

"Who's out there?!" he said, drawing the longsword from his back.

The rasp of it leaving a sheath almost ten feet long made d'Argent tremble. He'd started out a teacher. He probably wasn't used to the field of battle, and now that he'd lost the use of both hands he'd probably be afraid of his own shadow.

The giant bellowed, "Come on out. Garigon's the name. I'm a Hunter. I came here to hunt the island's Nobility. So forget all that running and hiding and come right on out."

"Some acquaintance of yours?" d'Argent inquired.

Meg nodded. In a sense, she was running into a member of her party again. She wanted to jump right out of hiding. However, something held her back.

"Oh, not coming out, are you? If you're out milling about with the sun still bright, that means you ain't a Noble. What are you, some reject who only got half drained? Not that it matters. I'm gonna flush you out right quick!"

The giant thrust his longsword out in front with both hands and held it level to the ground. The instant the swordsman's eyes closed, Meg felt a powerful shudder go through d'Argent's body. She herself had twitched.

The longsword stretched. Or rather, a beam the same width as the weapon shot from its tip. On coming into contact with a stand of trees, it tore through them like they were paper, then zipped off into the far reaches of the woods.

"Get out here!"

The giant spun. The beam of light filled the pair's field of view. Meg had quickly ducked down, and now the air above her head wavered. Instinctively, she shouted, "Run for it!"

Beside her, the trunk of the gigantic tree they'd been hiding behind fell, shaking the earth in the process. The cut end was facing her, and it was so smooth it left Meg amazed. She'd thought it'd been a heat beam, but there were no signs of charring. Meg decided it had to be the work of a kind of energy beyond her imagining.

"It's willpower, you know," d'Argent said from right behind her. He hadn't been kidding about being a teacher. "Though the human will is colorless and shapeless, there are times when it takes one form or another. Which is what that light is."

As the mystery was explained away, a voice befitting that gargantuan form called down from overhead, "Why, if it ain't Meg! Never would've expected to run into you out here!"

"How sweet of you to remember me," Meg said, running her eyes across their surroundings as she got to her feet.

Suddenly, a vast clearing seemed to have come into being. All the way into the distance trees had been mowed down at the same height, with toppled trunks, branches, and leaves stretching on and on in a

new land. No one would've believed all that had been accomplished by one man with a single swing of his longsword.

"You bet your buns I did," the giant replied with a belly laugh. "Back in the tunnel, I got separated from the others. Hell, I didn't even think you'd made it out okay. So, who's this you've got with you?"

"A survivor from the group of settlers. Seems everybody else was killed."

"Well that's great," the giant said, his eyes gleaming. "I haven't run into nobody yet. So, tell me all about these Nobles."

"I'm d'Argent. I was a teacher."

"A teacher? You don't say," Garigon remarked, his smile becoming a mocking sneer. Teachers would be the eternal bane of ruffians like him.

"Know what became of the other bounty hunters?" Meg inquired in an effort to dispel the awkward atmosphere.

Immediately shaking his head, the giant replied that he didn't. "The sheriff's boy—his name was Wesley or something like that, right? He's dead."

Meg was at a loss for words.

"He took Lancer's spear in the belly and was dying. With a wound like that, he was a goner."

"And you didn't try to save him or anything?" Meg asked as she tried to choke down something hot rising within her.

"Give me a break. I had these freaks on my tail, you know. Didn't have time to dick around with that."

Meg nodded twice. With the first she recalled the young lawman's smiling face, and with the second it disappeared. He'd been swallowed up by rough seas. That was what Dad had taught her to do when somebody died.

"So, you headed anywhere in particular? Like the Nobles' home?"

"We were doing fine until a little while ago," Meg replied.

The girl searched for the vehicle, but couldn't find it anywhere. But even if they had it, without Lord Danae along they wouldn't know where to go.

"Things can never be easy, can they?" the girl groaned, but just then an unsettling laugh from nowhere in particular reached her ears.

"It's close," Garigon said, training his eye on the sky and turning to the left. That was the direction he'd come from.

The trio's eyes focused on the figure that appeared from the bushes.

"A Noble?" Garigon groaned.

One look at the azure cape and clothing that called to mind the sea and a mask studded with jewels, and anyone else would've come to the same conclusion.

“No, scratch that,” the giant continued. “It’s still daytime.”

“They have items that let them walk around by day,” Meg said, countering Garigon’s assessment.

“You don’t say. So, it’s the real thing, then?” Garigon asked, his longsword still unsheathed. “That suits me just fine. I bet you thought rescuing the villagers was a job for the lawmen, and the rest of us were just along as bodyguards. Now, to get down to work! You two, hit the dirt.”

As he said that, the great blade flashed out, howling through the wind—and the masked Noble was visibly shaken as he made a great leap back. When he landed some fifteen feet away, Garigon already had the tip of his sword aimed straight at the Noble’s heart. The giant’s lips twisted into a smile. That smile was rooted in his overwhelming self-confidence. Would he call upon that same technique again?

“Down!” Meg shouted at d’Argent, lying flat on the ground. An endless sword of light flashed over their heads.

The gleaming willpower split the masked Nobleman’s head from his torso, then returned to being a normal blade.

Garigon’s eyes bugged. The Noble’s head hadn’t fallen off, and he saw his foe’s hand going for the sword on his hip.

“Raaah!” he snarled in anger, flashing out again with the blade of light.

Though split in two from head to crotch, the Noble bounded, his sword in turn cutting the giant in two from the head down to the lungs. An enormous quantity of fresh blood became a red wind whisking through the world and staining everything the same hue.

As Garigon dropped limply to his knees, Meg could only stare at him with desperation in her eyes. How could a giant of a man with such a tremendous ability be cut down so easily?

Heaven and earth alike rocked violently, and Meg dropped to one knee on the spot and tried to steady herself. In her ear, she heard Garigon say, “I think that’s about enough fun and games.”

Her surprise was so great, she immediately returned to her senses.

Garigon turned his face to her and smiled. His head wound was swiftly closing.

“You see now? I’ve long since been bit. Now I’m a faithful bodyguard to the Nobility.”

III

Once again dizziness assailed Meg. It was surprising that she could even speak.

“Garigon . . . Not you, too.”

“That’s right. Don’t think badly of me,” the giant said, and when he grinned, the fangs jutting from his mouth were yellowed. “Just accept that this is where you die and say yourself a little prayer to the sea god or whatever. I can wait that long!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. You’re the one who’s gonna die!” the girl screamed, and her harpoon flew.

The longsword made a diagonal swipe that cut the harpoon in two, and then the giant sailed easily into the air.

“Take that!”

The glow shooting out of the tip made Meg forget all else and throw herself on the ground—and less than an inch from her face the earth was split open for over fifteen feet.

“I really suck at this,” said the giant. “I went and missed you!”

When Garigon landed without making a sound, Meg found his smile mocking. He was toying with her. Though an anger great enough to make her tremble was building inside her, there was nothing she could do. He was too far out of her class.

“Okay, now for the finisher. I’ll cut the both of you in two—no, I guess that’d be four, maybe?”

Garigon’s longsword rose. So monstrous was his strength the weapon seemed to be made of wood. The beam of light rose vertically.

“Take that!” the giant roared.

Meg shut her eyes out of reflex. It was her ears that caught the change. She’d heard a cry of pain.

“Gaaaah . . . Geeerf . . .”

On opening, what Meg’s eyes beheld was the gigantic body arched backward with a stark piece of steel sticking from his chest.

“What the—?!”

It was a few seconds later that the girl learned the azure Noble’s sword had pierced Garigon’s heart from behind.

Letting out a roar like a carnivore, Garigon twisted around and swung his sword at the Nobleman behind him. The beam of light vanished in the distance, and the Nobleman who’d ducked it sprang back up and made a horizontal swipe of his blade, at which point Garigon’s head shot up on a geyser of blood like a fountain and landed again some thirty feet away.

Not even glancing at the fallen torso as it twitched, the Noble in azure shook the gore from his blade and turned in Meg’s direction.

Meg held her harpoon at the ready. Only two more remained. She felt helpless, and no fighting spirit rose within her.

An odd sense of calm seemed to flow from the Noble. Returning his sword to its sheath, the Noble turned his gaze to the bushes from which he’d come and tossed his chin in that direction. The gesture meant they should come with him.

Meg just stood there as if rooted, unable to make up her mind, but after the Noble had advanced another thirty feet or more, he turned around and gave another toss of his chin.

"Let's go," Meg said to d'Argent.

"Are you sure it's okay?"

"Well, it looks like he saved us, and I don't sense any murderous intent. Besides, just the two of us wouldn't get very far on our own."

However, their pursuit of him soon ended. Not ten feet away, a vehicle like the one from earlier was resting on the grass. The Noble pointed at it.

"Are you telling us to get on? What kind of Noble are you, anyway?"

In her heart, Meg thought with absolute certainty, *He's on our side*.

"Thank you," the girl said. "But I can't. I don't know how to work it."

"That's okay," d'Argent told her from her rear. "I do. I'll tell you how it's done."

The Noble nodded. And twisting to the left, he pointed in a given direction.

"That's the way to the bay!" d'Argent exclaimed, eyeing the Noble suspiciously.

Just then, a shrill cry could be heard overhead. It wasn't a bird. It came from a human being.

The crimson mass must've fallen from a height of at least a hundred yards. The instant it thudded to the ground, a silvery flash streaked out.

A bloody mist flew into the air. What'd fallen from the sky had split the masked Nobleman in two, from the top of his head all the way down to the crotch.

On seeing the figure who got up with bloodied sword in hand, Meg murmured in astonishment, "Lord Danae?!"

Aren't these two fellow Nobility?

As if reading Meg's thoughts, Danae stared at the staggering Nobleman who even now remained standing and said, "I've never seen you before. That being the case, you must be a foe pretending to be something he is not. Let us dispose of that mask that suits you so poorly."

Though Meg herself wished to see the face behind the mask, just then Danae's expression seemed to melt like wax.

The vermilion line where he'd bisected the Nobleman he labeled an imposter had quickly and completely vanished.

"Dear me, can it be—you actually are one of us?" Danae said in a tone that complemented his wary expression. "But I haven't seen you before. What do they call you?"

"Wesley."

It was the astonished Meg who murmured the name. The bisected Nobleman's mask had fallen at his feet.

His complexion was pale and bloodless, like that of a completely different person, yet the face of the youthful sheriff showed the same bashful smile as before.

"I was going to see that you got home safely—no, I *will* see to it the girl at least gets home okay."

His smile gave way to an absent-minded expression. Not looking at Meg or even in her direction, Wesley said, "Back in the tunnel, I was—well, Lancer got me with his spear, and I died. Or rather, I was just about to die when someone took me away. When I came to, I was a servant of the Nobility. The reason I came here is because I had orders to rescue Lord Danae and dispose of the two of you. And I was licking my chops as I set out. But the minute I saw you, Meg, all the feelings from when I was human came back to me. I don't know why. I'll hold off this Noble. Go to the bay, and hurry. This magno-car can run over water, too. Go back to your village and forget all about the island."

"No, Wesley. I can't do that. I came here to save everybody!"

Meg felt as if her heart were being torn in two. The group had come to rescue everybody—and Wesley had been their leader at one point.

"Here your unexpected and heartwarming reunion comes to an end," Danae informed the other Noble in the manner of a judge pronouncing a sentence. "Fortunately, I am not in your debt. Though we have only just met, I will slay you as a traitor."

"You can't!" the girl protested. "You owe me a debt, don't you? Don't you lay a hand on him!"

"Were he one of your compatriots, I would comply," Danae replied. "However, mockery though he may be, he is now one of *our* subordinates. These are rules of a world that bears no relation to you."

"That's right. Meg, keep back."

Once Wesley had said that, the two humans ran over to where Garigon's corpse lay, the wind whipping in their wake.

As soon as Danae's eyes got a reddish cast, two beams of light pierced either side of Wesley's chest. His face twisting, Wesley pursed his lips. Meg covered her ears. The sound waves, so sharp they seemed like they'd shatter eardrums, were apparently directional in nature. Danae also covered his ears, but from between his hands and his earlobes a massive amount of fresh blood sprayed out.

"Well, there's no going back to the castle now. Meg, hurry up and go home. Your world is still waiting for you!"

From behind a stand of trees some thirty feet away she heard Wesley's shouts.

"Wesley!"

"I have nowhere to go now. Can't be a Noble, and can't go back to being human. At least let me see to it you get home safe! Good-bye," Wesley shouted once more, and Meg cried. Tears spilled from her with no end in sight, drilling a little hole in the black earth.

Someone grabbed hold of the girl's shoulder.

Danae still had bright blood dripping from both ears as he said, "Have you finished bidding your lover adieu? Let us be off."

"I'm done," Meg replied, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"My vehicle was damaged by a bullet, but fortunately we have his. I'm sure it would please him if we were to use it for your purposes. However, our destination will not be the bay, but hell itself. Are you prepared for that?"

Perhaps Danae was in pain from the injuries he'd suffered, but his face wore an expression of evil unlike any they'd seen before.

"I sure am. And sooner or later, I'm gonna drive a stake through your heart," Meg said flatly. Her heart had been wounded again, and her eyes burned with hatred-tinged flames.

"Ah," Danae said, and he actually looked impressed. "You have the same look in your eye that I do. The most charming thing about humans is they are just like Nobles."

This place seemed like a luxurious palace where no expense had been spared, and that might have been solely due to the presence of the figure who hovered in the milky white fog.

Through orderly forests of pillars, over stairways that seemed to go all the way up to the sky, beneath a canopy ceiling which itself seemed as large as the cosmos, down corridors spanning quadrillions of miles over trillions of levels, the futile moans of those who built all this and those who traversed it seemed to linger forever.

We cannot complete construction, they say. *We shall never reach the end.*

Those who'd fallen with their aims unmet and their unfulfilled desires alike were covered by the fog, making their words echo endlessly.

Indestructible alloys and natural gemstones, the living's desire for death, the dead's resurrection even as they screamed for it to stop, the strains of music that played, the painting displayed there as unmistakable "reality," the steel sword still vainly stabbed into the rotting ruins of a castle, yes, even the path of the stars through the universe and the countless insignificant little lives brought forth in one corner of the planet—all these were lies.

However, on this island, so long as they were shrouded in fog, lies could wear the name of truth. For here, imitations were the real thing.

A Longing in the Fog
chapter 7

I

Mizuki, your grace," called out what was distinctly the voice of an old man.

"Is that you, Zangleson? What is your business with me?" replied the voice of Duchess Mizuki Dandorian. Though it was fuzzy, it came from what seemed to be an enormous throne. From the sound of it, she wasn't sitting bolt upright but rather languidly draped across the arms of the chair.

The one who called out to her didn't stand before the throne but rather was down on one knee in the ancient display of fealty.

"A short while ago, this item was left in the square before the main castle gates."

After a short pause, the duchess said, "Why, this is—?!" There was the sound of the Noblewoman drawing a sharp breath. "It bears an image of *that man*. However, this is human skin."

"It would appear to be the skin from the palm of a hand," said the servant. "That eye is drawn in normal ink, but the image it contains also holds *everything* about that person. With this, a person's location and all their actions are ours for the knowing."

"Who could make such a thing . . ."

"None other than—"

That was as much as the servant said before falling silent. But not out of puzzlement. Rather, it was out of anticipation, knowing that the person he addressed knew the rest.

"—his grace?"

"I should imagine."

"Why has he not returned? Even though everyone and everything has been restored, and it has all begun anew?"

There was a long interval. Undoubtedly that was an expression of some sort of objection.

Presently, Zangleson replied, "His grace will not be returning. Long ago, he bid your grace adieu and took his leave of the castle—and that is the truth of it for him. Even now, that has not changed."

Somewhere, someone nodded. Listlessly and sadly.

"Your tone—for all its consolation, it hides a blood-soaked blade. Perhaps the blade is called torment? Do you wish to say that I bear responsibility for all of this?"

“As you say, your grace.”

“You are correct,” said the duchess. “And I myself am well aware of as much. Of all our followers, you are the deepest, the truest, and the most fervent. His grace will not be returning. Even if one of the two is slain, they are likely to battle on in hell for all eternity. And I think that is for the best.”

“Your grace?!”

Unmoved by this cry of commingled surprise and reproach, the woman said, “You of all people must know. Long ago, I loved the one who brought destruction to this project, and to all of us. Not only was that a betrayal of all of you, it also was a moral breach against the Sacred Ancestor. For this project spilled through the Sacred Ancestor’s own fingers, coming down to us.”

Duchess Dandorian’s words were neither a simple deposition of memories nor a monologue to rouse herself. It was a viscera-shredding act of self-destruction, a confession given while blood poured from every orifice, a prayer uttered while swallowing one’s own teeth.

“But your grace fought that man—a man you loved—in an attempt to destroy him,” the servant said, his voice suddenly full of sorrow and pride.

“That is so. And I was defeated with disappointing ease. And not I alone. Gildea and Danae were as well, and you, and the ten thousand soldiers stationed on the island. He drove cold, black steel through the hearts of everyone, and lopped off the heads of all save Gildea and Danae. His will was as inevitable as the coming of night, and he displayed no emotion, as if he were a murderous machine shaped from ice. All was lost. Every last one of us was reduced to dust, the castle decayed, the facility burned, the test subjects ruined . . .”

“And after all that, why? Why have we now been resurrected? Is it to prove the truth of the legends that for the Nobility, peaceful sleep is but a dream within a dream?”

“For a feeling,” said the duchess. The way she said it was bizarre, as if she didn’t know which emotion the words should carry. “No, jealousy—enough to eat away even a body and stomach made of iron. Am I mistaken?”

“No,” Zangleson’s voice responded. “That is correct. However, that is not the full extent of it.”

The silence was the duchess’s creation.

“Kindly return that to me,” said the servant. “I shall keep it.”

The exchange was conducted in the mysteriously swaying fog. Or rather, it was *nearly* conducted.

“That will never do, your grace,” said a rough voice that left the fog in turmoil, fleeing from the speaker like a coward.

“Gildea.”

“Baron.”

“Are you well, Zangleson?” the figure who’d approached from the milky depths said in an affectionate tone. “You are an idiot who knows not his place, and this is folly—for which you will be punished once this matter is concluded. Your grace, kindly give that item to your humble servant, Gildea.”

She declined, saying, “I cannot.”

“But you must,” the baron countered, denying her in turn.

There in the heart of the syrupy fog, conflict sparked like a fire.

“If your grace keeps it, the same fate will be repeated. To wit, we will be destroyed, and none will stand in the rotting remains of this castle save that vision of beauty in black. And it may well be that such is not his desire, either.”

From the female figure, who was like a faint ink-wash painting, there came an intense feeling of curiosity, but she never gave voice to it, nor did Baron Gildea reply.

“Can you tell me the reason why I must not have it, Gildea?” the duchess said, her voice carrying a slight horror that someone would feel. The baron.

Gildea said, “Because you still love that man.”

The shadowy figures froze. Even the fog that clung to them was robbed of its motion.

“Your grace was less than twenty years of age when the duke took you as his bride. You were as beautiful as some princess from the moon, and though none ever breathed a word of it, all of us resolved that you alone would never know the filth and cruelty of the world. And as we had predicted, your grace was an individual lovely and endearing, as well as being far stronger and more ferocious than we had ever expected. When you walked with the duke in the garden to enjoy a bright moonlit evening, a group of young lords who envied the way your grace looked upon the moon said they would wipe it from the sky, whereupon they fought their way into the Bureau of Planetary Control. And during a demonstration match in the fighting arts, your grace took up bow and halberd with her pale and delicate hands, exhibiting such skill we were left no choice but to battle in complete earnestness, and even then we could get nowhere near you.

“With all that skill your grace fought that man, and was consequently defeated and destroyed. I say this bearing not a mote of criticism. However, your grace—love sets its roots deep in the young. Your grace was not yet twenty years of age when you encountered that man, and even knowing him to be the enemy, you were captivated by him from the very first glance. That tells me that even now, after dying and rising, your love for him still burns. There is a stanza in a poem that goes, *The life of love is like that of a Noble*, and I

cannot deny the truth in that."

"It is as you say, Gildea," the duchess conceded. "However, I, who fought the bringer of destruction, am confident that all will find me a fit wife for Duke Dandorian and his house."

"That is most welcome news," Gildea said, his voice trembling with joy.

The duchess continued, "Victory or defeat comes down to the luck of the moment. I was defeated, yet there is no shame in that. And even if the result of our next battle were to be the same, I would still be entitled to bear this item. There is another reason as well—this is the skin of my husband."

There was a hushed murmur from the world. And in the hush, a voice was heard to say, "Your grace, discounting the time I was dead, I am 2,006 years of age. I acknowledge all that your grace has stated, but such things are said due to age. So long as you love him, you cannot win. Even if your grace were to change your appearance, to change your heart, to gain abilities tens of thousands of times as strong as his, you will not triumph over that man in all eternity. From the moment your grace first let him sway your heart, you became the vanquished party for all time. Is that not so, Zangleson?"

There was no reply.

"What do you think, Zangleson?"

The source of the elderly voice seemed to shrink into the fog.

The other two put no further questions to him. Now all that remained was to wait.

Presently a dry, withered voice said, "I believe I would like Baron Gildea to have it."

"I see," the duchess said, her voice actually sounding rather refreshing. "However, even if your opinions are correct, I will not follow them. Both of you are, ultimately, vassals of the Dandorian family, and that is the iron rule."

"This we know." The two voices overlapped. They had a ghastly ring to them, as if the speakers' outward mental strength counted for nothing, and some innate difference in nature had been hammered into the marrow of their bones.

"Very well, then. Gildea, I shall be keeping this. I am hardly the sort to not know their own heart. And my heart says that the two of you are correct. However, Gildea, there is an arrow that missed my heart and remains stuck in my soul. It is I who made his grace suffer his present fate. And even after my destruction that arrow has shaken me without a moment's respite, I must confess. I wish to do battle with that man for my heart and my soul and his grace—Duke Daios Dandorian. And why is it that his grace left this for me rather than making use of it himself? I am of the opinion it is his grace's wish that

the woman who betrayed him exact his revenge on the one with whom she was unfaithful. Cruel though it may seem, I must follow through. I will slay that man without fail. Have I made myself understood?"

The duchess's voice was filled with such distress it would've made any who heard it want to cover their ears.

The answer she immediately received brimmed with the same distress.

"You mustn't do this, your grace. By all means, leave it to me, your humble servant, Gildea."

This was a battle of wills between not two but three people, and no matter what form the contestants imagined their conflict would take, they never could've predicted what actually happened.

Suddenly a different presence had come into being close to the trio. Judging from its position, it had undoubtedly entered through the doorway, but even that thought didn't occur to the other three due to how truly overwhelming the presence was. Yet when they tried to learn anything more about the new arrival, they couldn't sense a thing. While the owner of the presence was there, they also couldn't help but feel he also *wasn't* there.

The following words seeped into the ears or brains of the group. *I shall take that.*

A heartbeat later, three speechless people prostrated themselves. In compliance with the iron rule of the Nobility.

What is to be handed over shall be given to the one who should receive it. No ill will is to be harbored, no matter what results from this action.

They had neither the will nor the right to inquire as to what that weird final sentence was supposed to mean.

And just as abruptly as it had come to be there, the presence departed.

No one moved, and no one spoke aloud the name that now occupied their minds. *The Sacred Ancestor.* And the piece of skin her husband had left, containing everything about D, was suddenly gone from Duchess Mizuki Dandorian's hands.

II

The sound of waves rocked the night that'd fallen over the island. However, no matter how intently the average person might listen in this spot so far removed from the coast, there was no way they would ever hear that sound. For the sound of waves was ringing in Meg's head.

The *thing* that'd suddenly appeared in the distance as their vehicle sped through the trees, grass, and vines finally took shape as an

enormous scientific research facility.

“This is the castle?” the girl asked, but Danae’s reply was one she could’ve expected.

“Does it appear as such?”

“No.”

The gigantic metallic dome glistened in the moonlight, with rows of pipes that ran on forever like a road and innumerable smaller domes—there were absolutely no antennas or other protrusions from the stylish design. This was certainly one of the Nobility’s facilities, but even more than that, the old-fashioned stone steps and the motley array of passageways leading to the dome were hallmarks of the Nobility. Take away all its modern stylishness and replace it with rough walls with arrow slits, watchtowers, and minarets, and you would have a castle.

“In that case, let’s get going,” said the girl. “We don’t have time to waste.”

“It’s night already. Our world. Do you think yourselves safe because I accompany you?” asked Danae.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“Why not wait here until daybreak? More importantly, you may be able to meet some of your acquaintances.”

“Excuse me?!” Meg exclaimed, eyes agleam.

D’Argent gave her a nod. There was no trace of pain on his face. Wesley had left a storage box on his vehicle, and in it had been a first aid kit containing pain relievers. The kit had probably belonged to the settlers.

“This is the research facility, Meg,” d’Argent said, turning a frightened gaze on the building that towered in the darkness. “I’ve never been back there since I escaped, but the last time I saw it, these were ruins choked with weeds. And now—it’s just like it was back in the day. It’s too remarkable, even for something the Nobility did. What the hell happened?”

“You said it was a research facility. What kind of research?” Meg asked indifferently, and she instantly regretted it. Even through the darkness, the look on d’Argent’s face gave her goosebumps.

“Experiments to turn humans into another form of life.”

As soon as she finished listening to his morose delivery, Meg spun around angrily.

Danae had a distinct grin on his face.

“Having come this far, would it not be odd for you to continue on without knowing? A portion of your compatriots were sent here. Which is precisely why I stopped.”

“Everybody’s inside?”

“A portion.”

“But they’re here, right? Where?!”

Danae raised his right hand and indicated the massive central dome.

“Don’t lie to me!”

Meg adjusted her grip on the harpoon, aiming its point at Danae. For some reason she got the feeling she could’ve killed him with ease if she so desired.

“I shall keep my word. You shall be brought as far as the castle. Any battles along the way, however, will be without comment or assistance from me.”

“Who’d want your help anyway?” Meg spat venomously, and then she looked back at d’Argent. “You can’t use your arms, so wait here. Loan me that weapon of yours, though.”

“No, I’m going with you. Don’t worry, I won’t slow you down. I

can flee with the best of them."

"In that case, okay," Meg assented easily. When she thought about it, it made sense that an injured man wouldn't want to stay behind with a Noble.

Slipping on the hand of destruction, Meg immediately gave up on trying to use it. It simply made it too difficult to work her fingers. For a harpooner, that was a fatal flaw. In terms of sheer destructive power, her weapon couldn't begin to compare, but it gave her a much better sense of security.

As soon as the girl took the hand of destruction off her arm, d'Argent started to object, saying, "Hey, use that! It's a lot more powerful than that harpoon of yours."

Giving the harpoon a rap, Meg said, "But I'm more used to this."

"It may not be the easiest thing to use, but you'll get accustomed to it soon enough. With our lives on the line, this is the choice for sheer power."

Meg pretended to mull it over, then said, "Okay, just in case."

She secured his weapon to her belt.

"Aren't you gonna show us the way?" the girl asked.

Danae only grinned and replied, "I should warn you, there are a few researchers inside. Be careful."

When the humans stood before a wall without a single seam, a rectangular entrance opened. The light that leaked out reached all the way to the pair, casting small shadows at their feet.

Coughing once, the girl said, "Here we go."

Meg walked through the Nobles' doorway.

They stood rooted in place in a lobby that looked to be a hundred times the size of the square back in her village.

"State your destination. Even a murmur will suffice," said a voice that suddenly rained down on them. It was genderless synthesized speech.

"Our destination—where would that be?!" the girl wondered aloud.

"The location of the humans abducted from the mainland," d'Argent said in her place. Meg recalled that he, too, had been a test subject.

The scene around them changed.

"Wh-what's all this? A movie?"

"No," said d'Argent, "we're moving at ultra-high speed."

"We're moving?"

The very thought was inconceivable. It didn't feel that way at all. There wasn't even any breeze striking them.

The "movement" had apparently finished while the girl was still busy being stunned.

The black wall before them had the same door in it as the one in the lobby.

Meg hesitated. Things were going too well, and worse yet, far too speedily. It would be best to plan on things turning ugly any minute now. However, even realizing that, she had no choice but to go forward. Harpoon at the ready, Meg went inside.

The room was overflowing with light, and the ceiling, floor, and walls were all black.

"Is that stonework?" the girl asked.

"Yeah, it is."

"Why? Iron or steel would do the job a lot easier from what I've heard."

"The Nobility have a penchant for old things. Which is why they favor antiquated carriages and castles over ion cars and buildings of plastic and metal alloys. A castle made of iron would never do."

As she listened to d'Argent's explanation, Meg was half in a daze.

There was fog there in the room, too. Here and there tables that looked like black beds slipped in and out of sight, and on them were forms that were most definitely human.

"They're here!" Meg exclaimed, and she was just about to dash forward when d'Argent blocked her way.

"Why the hell did you stop me?!"

"I know what it's like. I know what kind of experiments they did here. It's probably already—"

"Already what?!"

Meg was about to really lay into the man when, out of the corner of her eye, she caught some kind of crimson glow. They were small luminous points. However, every last one of them was set in the faces of the figures on the tables, who were looking their way. It was their eyes.

"That's proof they're vampires," d'Argent told her. "They're not just victims anymore. These are full-fledged servants of the Nobility—vampires."

"That's not true . . ."

Now each and every figure sat up on their table and looked at them.

"That one's . . . Auntie Mabel . . . and over there's Mr. Ulmer . . . Emilio Kapsch . . . Gialisuna Kapsch . . . and Zacco . . . Raoul's here, too. Everybody . . . you're all okay . . . right?"

Meg herself didn't believe what she was saying.

"Meg, let's get out of here. We're too late."

Though d'Argent jostled her shoulder, Meg didn't move. She had to know for sure. She had to see with her own eyes what'd happened to them.

A dense fog covered the girl's eyes, then quickly flowed past.

An old woman was standing there.

"Auntie Mabel . . ."

"So good of you to come, Meg," the deeply wrinkled face said, smiling gaily.

"Let's get out of here, Auntie Mabel. And get everyone else, too. Our village is a thousand times better than this creepy place."

"That's not true at all," the old woman countered.

"What?"

"Oh, life here is wonderful. The Nobility made machines to do everything, and my infirmities don't trouble me anymore. You know about all my health problems, don't you? I have the gout in my right foot, and arthritis in the left. Any pressure on one or the other hurts like the bone's been shattered. I've got an acute hernia that left me hunched over, and my liver, kidneys, and pancreas have all lost ninety percent of their function. My lungs are shot, so I get to coughing at night and can't stop. Do you know how it feels to not be able to get to sleep every night out of fear you'll suffocate? And all that got wiped away!"

The old woman's face was radiant with joy.

"She's right."

Mr. Ulmer's aged, sun-bronzed face appeared from the fog.

Meg heard d'Argent swallow hard.

"You know how I was in the final stages of lung cancer, right?" Mr. Ulmer continued. "Hell, you even came and visited me. But you know what? Not a single person from the town hall ever came. In eighty-two years of woodworking, how many boats you figure I made? How many did I repair? Now, I don't wanna toot my own horn, but how many hundreds of lives have been saved by the double hulls I built, do you reckon? Meg, the town hall called in a new shipwright to replace me, didn't they?"

That was a top secret back in the village. When Mr. Ulmer had become bedridden a year and a half earlier, the village had already offered his position to a shipwright from the north shore fifty years his junior. Every day the old man had shot his mouth off, asking, "Who you gonna get to fix your boats when I'm gone?" and a portion of the village had definitely found him irritating in that regard.

Meg didn't answer, and apparently taking *that* as her answer, the old man nodded deeply.

"The way I am now, I've got a hundred times the strength I had in my prime. Look at me! With this mallet and chisel I could probably build a boat from scratch in half a day's time. But that's not what I'm gonna use 'em for. I'm gonna use 'em for destruction. I'll use 'em to pound those town hall bastards who couldn't wait to see me dead into

the ground once and for all."

His hand was like a specter rising from the sea of fog, and in it he gripped a chunk of iron with a keen edge.

"Which reminds me, Meg—did you try to stop 'em from bringing somebody in to replace me?"

"No. Actually, I only found out after it'd all been decided."

Though Meg had spoken the truth, the old man shook his head gravely.

"That's what they all say. Auntie Mabel, and the whole Gates family beside her, and everybody else says that. *I wanted to protest, but it was already decided. But next time I'll stand up for you!* Well, there ain't a next time."

Meg became aware that at some point she'd lowered her harpoon and was adjusting her grip on it.

"But that doesn't matter anymore. Meg, I've been sweet on you since way back. Always thought you were a little dear. So you'll become one of us by my hand."

The old man hauled back with his right hand.

"Nooo!" Meg exclaimed, and as the word exploded from her, the harpoon in her right hand thrust forward.

III

Even Meg was surprised at how solid the hit felt. Actually, she'd not only driven her harpoon into Mr. Ulmer's massive barrel chest, but poked it all the way out through his back.

With a mallet that looked to weigh better than sixty pounds still raised, the old man shuddered. Gnashing his teeth, he swung down with his right hand. The wind howled.

Meg and d'Argent heard the sound of the mass of iron ravaging the floor just ten feet behind them.

The old man held that pose for a while. Then he lifted his head and gave the two of them an innocent smile. His smile was so guileless, Meg had to wonder if there hadn't been some mistake.

Mr. Ulmer touched a calloused finger to his upper lip. The cuspids that grew from his exposed gums were pernicious fangs. They'd been honed to rip into Meg's soft throat.

"It can't be . . . If you're a servant of the Nobility . . . and I stabbed you right through the heart . . ." Meg groaned, but d'Argent's hand grabbed hers and pulled her along after him.

A milky fog covered the world. She ran with d'Argent.

Her ears caught someone saying, "Meg." The call came from far off in the distance. And it was d'Argent's voice.

Meg planted both feet firmly to stop. D'Argent stopped, too. It

finally dawned on the girl that the hand grasping hers was horribly cold and bony.

The shadowy figure turned around. Just then—the fog flowed away. There was Auntie Mabel, baring a pair of fangs.

"Me-e-eg."

When the old woman tried to embrace her, Meg swung her to the right as hard as she could. The girl, in turn, was swung around as well. Her wrist was still in the old woman's grip. Scattering the fog, the two of them continued spinning in elegant circles.

The old woman planted her feet and jerked the girl closer. Meg was pulled in by the tremendous strength of the vampire, and her soft throat was left exposed for the old woman's mouth. The wrinkled mouth snapped open wide, and then there was a cry of pain and bright blood gushed out. Of course, neither belonged to Meg.

Using all her might to escape the old woman's grip, Meg stared at something on the chest of her lurching attacker. A wooden harpoon was embedded in it. A harpoon the girl had drawn with her left hand while they were spinning in circles.

"Me-e-eg!"

There was the sound of footsteps running toward her through the fog, which then took the form of d'Argent.

"You okay?" she asked.

"More or less."

"What about the old-timer?"

"Damned if I know," the former teacher replied. "I just heard a voice that sounded like it was in pain."

"He was stabbed through the heart and he wasn't destroyed—what the hell kind of creatures were they turned into?"

"Ageless and indestructible," d'Argent murmured.

"Huh?"

"The experiments carried out here were intended to turn humans into another form of life. I'm ageless, but not indestructible. Maybe the old man got the reverse."

Indestructibility. The owner of a body that could take a stake through the heart and not be destroyed—that would be a true undead, a true *nosferatu*.

"Gaaaah," the old woman cried, turning toward them.

"Her, too?!" d'Argent exclaimed, eyes bulging.

"No. That's where her lung would be. I missed her heart!" said Meg.

"She's getting even wilder!"

The old woman seized the harpoon in her chest and yanked it out. When she slammed it against the floor, the pair broke into a run.

Meg quickly halted and said, "No, this way!"

“How do you know?”

“Never mind that, it’s this way!”

Apparently d’Argent wasn’t too sure of himself, so he said no more and started running.

Meg’s mind kept replaying the same question d’Argent had asked. *How in blazes do I know where the exit is in all this fog?*

Just as the girl was about to turn her attention to the matter, she sensed a presence on the left.

“Look out!”

Faster than Meg could say that, there was a dull thud of impact from the vicinity of d’Argent’s head. Something warm flew at the girl’s face. Though she dodged most of it with a speed that surprised even herself, some stuck to her right cheek.

A mass of black came out of the fog. Ducking down so it passed right over her, Meg then sped over toward d’Argent. He lay some twenty to twenty-five feet away.

“I’m just—”

He couldn’t finish what he was saying, and Meg shut her eyes. Her nostrils prickled at the thick stench of blood. D’Argent was missing the right half of his face.

“I’m just fine,” he said feebly through the half of his lips that remained. “At least, that’s what I’m supposed to tell you, but I’m not so great. Looks like I won’t have to go through my whole life saying I don’t want to grow old, but this is no good—I don’t want to die.”

Meg heaved a sigh. A great weigh sat on her chest, and it was all she could do to fight back the tears. After all, wasn’t she the one who’d dragged this man from a stable existence? The bounty hunters, Wesley—why had she brought a curse on all of them?

“Don’t let it get to you,” the man said. “More importantly, something’s coming.”

Meg nodded and got to her feet. From head to toe she burned with sorrow—and the rage it whipped up.

Something black was approaching from the depths of the fog.

“Step right up. Come and get it,” Meg said, her lips twisting. This wasn’t her anger suppressing her fear, but rather an innate confidence in her own victory that raced throughout her body with her blood flow.

Mr. Ulmer appeared out of nowhere.

Meg’s eyes bugged. The old man’s face had gone beyond a look of agony and all the way to a rictus. His upper body was stained red, and a slender wooden harpoon was planted right in the middle of his chest.

“Found you!” the old man said. His right hand had been behind him, but now it rose, still gripping his mallet. As Meg stood poised for

action, her ears caught a hard clang. The old man had dropped his weapon. His forefinger was aimed at Meg.

"Wha—aren't you gonna fight?"

The old man's lips held a smile that gave the girl chills. It was the kind they called "death's grin." A smile that evil was the last thing you saw before they sent you to hell.

"I've no intention of fighting. Meg . . . I . . . I've come to tell you something," said the old man, his teeth chattering and blood dripping from the corners of his mouth.

"Tell me what?!" Meg asked, a cloud of anxiety staking a black claim to her heart. There was no way it would be good news.

The old man pointed to the harpoon with his left hand.

"The instant you ran this through me . . . I knew. But you don't know . . . the most important thing . . . Meg, you're . . ."

Meg was about to shout at him to stop. She had the feeling she absolutely couldn't hear what he was going to say. Though she slapped her hands over her ears, her eyes never left the old man.

Mr. Ulmer tumbled forward and fell to the floor, but even seeing that didn't surprise the girl much because it all seemed so unreal, like she was watching a single frame from a silent movie. Even before she concluded the old man must've run out of power, his body had turned to ash.

"Meg," d'Argent called to her from down on the floor.

She dropped to one knee beside him.

"What did he . . . want with you?"

"I don't know."

That was the only answer she could give.

"Instead of killing you, he tried to tell you something . . . What could be so important . . . ?"

"I really don't know. Forget that. Can you stand?"

"Nope . . . Carry me on your back, please."

"Sure thing."

Meg swiftly put down the other knee and turned her back to d'Argent.

"Up we go!"

With that, the man's arms looped around Meg's neck and the two of them timed it so they tried to stand in unison.

D'Argent's breath struck the nape of her neck. Meg felt like she'd been touched with a piece of ice, and her body froze, too.

"D'Argent—not you, too?"

"Sorry, Meg. That old man fed on me just now. I tried to hold it in, but when I saw your naked skin and felt the warmth of your body, that was it."

Meg trembled. Lips had just touched the nape of her neck.

“Meg,” the former teacher said, and she felt his accursed mouth open.

“Nooo!”

Meg’s elbow shot back. When some drunk had thrown his arms around her at a village festival years earlier, her reflexive action had been identical. The result was also the same. D’Argent let out a low groan, and his hands came away from her.

As Meg tried to dash away, a cold hand snared her ankle. She fell face-down, but immediately twisted herself around so she was facing up. D’Argent’s face had crept to about thigh level on her.

“Stop it!”

“It’s no use, Meg,” d’Argent said. “I can’t fight it. And you’re out of harpoons, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m out . . .”

D’Argent crawled closer, his hand touching the swell of her breast.

“But I do have something else!” the girl cried.

A blistering beam of light punched through d’Argent’s chest and out his back. Throwing the man’s weight off her, Meg got to her feet and took aim with the hand of destruction.

“Right, you still had that? But I thought . . . you wouldn’t use it . . .”

“It’s best to be practical,” Meg said even as she choked back something that was rising within her.

“Hurry up . . . and shoot,” d’Argent told her. “Half my heart’s still left.”

The world glowed.

She could see clean through the six-inch hole that’d been opened in d’Argent’s chest. Black smoke mingled with the fog.

“Ordinarily, I’d have vanished . . . Mustn’t have been enough energy. Like me, that weapon’s . . . on its last legs.”

“Hang in there. You can’t die, right?”

“How many times do we have to go over this before you get it right? I’m ageless . . . not indestructible.”

“Whatever the case, you’ve got to survive. But we’re through as a team.”

D’Argent laughed. It was a lighthearted one.

“You’re a sweet kid. Strong, too. Be careful out there. The Noble outside should be able to help you.”

“I’m so sorry,” Meg said, wiping her tears. Pulling off the hand of destruction, she tossed it down by d’Argent’s side. “I’ll leave that with you. You can finish yourself off, right?”

“Sure.”

“Good-bye.”

Meg turned her back to him.

“Meg,” d’Argent called to her.

She looked back.

The barrel of the hand of destruction was trained on her.

“D’Argent?!” she cried out in despair, and at the same time the weapon spit fire.

Rhapsody in “Blood”
chapter 8

I

Blistering heat skimmed past Meg’s waist and chest. The girl turned around. Standing there was a woman dressed in Auntie Mabel’s clothes. The reason her identity couldn’t be absolutely confirmed was because everything from the neck up was missing. A massive hole also gaped in the left side of her chest.

Not even glancing at the body as it fell like dead wood, Meg turned once more toward d’Argent. Wearing a wonderful smile like she’d never seen on him, he lowered the hand of destruction. Meg didn’t say anything.

“Hear that?” d’Argent asked in a hushed tone.

Meg nodded.

Countless footfalls were drawing closer from behind the man. There had been more than two vampires on those tables, after all.

“Hurry up . . . Go! Leave them to me . . . I’ll hold them. Got enough energy left . . . for that.”

It was unclear if the former teacher was referring to himself or his weapon.

D’Argent sluggishly swung around so that he was facing the direction of the footsteps.

“This time, for real—good-bye.”

His voice was bursting with a firmness and righteousness the girl hadn’t heard from him before.

This was no longer the place for Meg.

“Good-bye,” Meg said, starting to walk toward the doorway. After she’d gone a short distance, she turned back and shouted as loudly as she could, “Good-bye, teacher!”

It was unclear whether or not her words reached d’Argent’s ears. Nothing came in return from that world, already sealed away in milky whiteness.

Stepping out into the corridor, the girl shouted, “To the front hall!”

The scene around her didn’t shift.

“What’s wrong?! Take me to the first-floor lobby!”

Though Meg stomped her feet, the world maintained its motionless silence. Some force was at work, halting all energy-based transportation in the enormous facility.

Countless corridors up ahead ascended, descended, and

intersected, all of them being drawn into the depths of the blue light. No matter which one she chose, Meg got the feeling she, too, had no choice but to become a part of that blue world.

"In that case, I'll take this one!"

Planting her first foot in a corridor continuing in a straight line, Meg started running. Because just then, she'd noticed a strange presence approaching from up ahead.

Reaching for her hip, Meg clucked her tongue in disappointment. She wanted to look for a place to hide, but even the black wall of the room she'd just escaped had vanished. She was like someone who'd been abandoned naked in a wilderness teeming with wolves.

Before the girl could start to think about what she should do, the presence took shape. It was quite a few figures who formed a circle as they headed that way. One of them sailed into the air, lashing out with a stark blade in midflight. A cry of pain rang out—and was gone. Falling to the floor in a bizarre pose, the figure instantly disappeared.

Several more figures charged into the center of the circle, reeled backward, and vanished. But now Meg saw the cause. The edge of the ring had closed to about fifteen feet from Meg, but from part of it that'd broken she got a full-length glimpse of the foe they challenged, who was destroying all comers. He was dressed in black, and his looks were so gorgeous he seemed to glow like a jewel in this world of blue.

"D?!"

Shadowy figures leapt from all sides. From what Meg saw, their incredible bounds were every bit as skilled as they were powerful, yet artless swipes of D's sword left their heads sailing helplessly through the air and crashing to the floor with sprays of blood, playing out the poetry of death.

Meg counted seventeen foes reduced to dust, and then D sheathed his bloody blade and stood before her, but the girl remained there stiff as a statue. The fight had been so fiercely one-sided it'd left her stunned. Even wounded, a dhampir would be able to slay his foes. However, to all appearances D hadn't suffered so much as a scratch.

Since the girl said nothing, the Hunter asked, "What are you doing?"

The instant that icy voice entered Meg's ears, the spell over her was broken.

"Actually—" the girl began, not really telling him the situation so much as rattling on about it. The instant she finished her account, a terrible shame swept over Meg and she turned bright red. She was embarrassed to have exposed so much about herself to this exquisite man.

For all the girl's wondering what he'd say to her, it ended up being, "Get out."

"What?"

"I'm going to destroy this facility," D told her. "Hurry up and get out of here."

"No! Folks from my village might still be here."

"It's too late for them."

"Th-th-that's not for you to decide! H-h-how do you know that?!"

"Because that's the nature of the Nobility, and I reviewed the operational data for the facility. There are no longer any regular humans here."

"That can't be," Meg murmured, and her ears caught the sounds of several sets of footsteps. She didn't know whether or not it was same ones off the tables, but a number of people were running that way.

"All the facility contains is *former* humans," D said.

Meg got goosebumps. She knew what he had to mean by that.

"Go, or you'll see things you'll wish you hadn't," D said, his eyes no longer trained on Meg but rather gazing past her head and into the darkness behind her.

"No, I'm staying here!"

D stepped forward without a word.

The events of the next few seconds were a nightmare for Meg. The figures came running, each with a sword or beam cannon in hand, but they were reduced to stains on D's blade without ever landing even a single hit on the Hunter. Meg knew a number of them. The rest were probably members of the party of settlers. He wasn't the sort of opponent newly changed Nobles could handle.

As D sheathed his blade, he saw the girl sobbing, one corpse cradled in her arms while she clasped two others by the hands.

"Your family?" he asked.

"Dad . . . and Mom . . . and my little sister!" Meg clamped her jaws together. Nevertheless, her voice forced its way through her teeth. "You killed them . . . You left me . . . all alone in the world . . . What are you gonna tell me they did?"

"It's what they would've done next. They'd have become bloodthirsty demons and attacked humans. Just as you saw."

"Yeah," Meg said, squeezing the word out in a mournful tone.

Her father, mother, and sister had all sported fangs when they attacked D. They had been nothing but beasts starved for blood. And that wasn't all—on noticing Meg, her mother and sister had closed in on her, and even now they had their hands out in front of their chest as if to pounce. They seemed to say, *We want your blood, Meg.*

"If they're allowed to reach the human world, the number of pseudo-Nobles will increase geometrically," D explained. "Their line must end here."

"Oh . . . just do whatever you want," Meg said in a dazed tone.

“But I’m bringing the bodies of my family back with me. I’ll take ’em back to the village and bury ’em there. Don’t try to stop me.”

D stepped forward without a word.

The door there was still open. Slipping in quietly, D looked all around. Beyond a doubt, this was one of the Nobility’s labs. Once upon a time, tens of thousands of humans had been sacrificed there in bizarre experiments. On learning that, the Hunter had crossed over to the island and destroyed all its facilities. Nobility and humans alike had been relegated to the flames. But all that had been resurrected. Toward what end, Mizuki Dandorian? Why did you and your staff have to rise from the dead now?

No, there was more to it. Behind D’s eyelids, there floated a ridiculously large figure in black. *Was it you?* he asked. *Are you the one behind these resurrections? Do you intend to make the same stupid mistakes all over again?*

D pressed on to the back of the laboratory, coming to the control panel for the energy furnace 6,200 miles below.

When D came back out less than a minute later, the scene that greeted him was one of gray dust dancing vainly in the breeze, and nothing more. Both Meg and her family’s bodies had vanished. Saying nothing, D went back down to the first floor—the same as the lobby.

II

That wasn’t where Meg had come in. D had probably entered the building without encountering Lord Danae. When they went outside and saw the view, it was indeed different. Meg couldn’t begin to guess where in that vast site Danae might be.

“Tired?”

The sudden question made her flinch. Even if heaven and earth switched places, the gorgeous young man didn’t seem likely to say such a thing. Looking at this young man, you could tell that beauty and humanity were absolutely incompatible. Meg immediately felt a trembling building within her.

“Not at all,” she replied. Though the girl wanted to show his concern was appreciated, the truth was she actually didn’t feel the slightest bit fatigued.

Next, D asked, “What’ll you do?”

Does he mean what I think? Meg thought, a thrill racing through her.

“What’ll I do? You mean if I said I’m going with you, you’d bring me along?” she asked curtly, an undisguised expectation in her voice. Not that she ever thought he’d grant her wish.

“Sure,” D said, his arm looping around Meg’s waist.

“What are you doing?!”

“We need to hurry.”

As he’d said, he began to knife through the wind, his speed so great it made the average person’s sprint look like a turtle’s pace.

Five minutes after they plunged into the forest, waves of blue light closed on the pair from behind. That was the end of the accursed facility.

“Dad . . . Mom . . . Ida . . .”

Meg said their names, intending to recite a requiem for them.

The two of them decided to spend the rest of the night in a clearing that lay in the middle of the forest. Meg had her suspicions something was wrong, but they were swallowed up by the waves of joy rippling through her heart and the fog that lingered in the area.

Since Meg had already recounted her journey thus far back by the laboratory, D didn’t ask her anything further about that, though he did inquire about the machinery the strange woman had appeared from before the girl had met d’Argent, such as the size and shape of it. He asked it so casually, Meg herself soon forgot all about it.

Unexpectedly, the Hunter said to her, “Your business here should be finished now. You can go back to your village. I’ll see you to the bay. You can go back on the boat I used to come over.”

“What, you won’t bring me all the way back to the village?” she asked, knowing fully well she was being unreasonable.

“I’m in a hurry. You can wait at the bay if you like, but there’s no guarantee I’ll make it back.”

That was how every day must’ve been for him. Meg actually flinched at the thought of how hard and fierce those days would be.

“No, I’ll go with you,” she responded, but not because of her competitive nature.

“Why?”

“I—well, I didn’t come over here just for my family. I was here to save everybody. I’ve had some pretty scary experiences, and I could do without having any more, but as long as somebody might be left, I can’t go home.”

Meg said that fully prepared to be mocked as an idiot. Such conventional resolve was no more than the babbling of a little girl in light of the shocking reality of this island.

Who would’ve believed D would say to her, “Okay. Come with me. But you’ll be risking your life.”

The warning he’d appended seemed like little more than futile whispers to Meg’s ears.

Earlier, she’d noticed that D had his saddlebags over his shoulder. He’d pulled an atomic torch out of them and switched it on, providing Meg with light and warmth. After watching him get it out, there was

something she wanted to ask him. At first she'd thought she really shouldn't and had held her tongue, but on seeing that he indeed used his right hand to undo the flap of the bag, she finally said, "What happened to your left hand?"

"It's resting," D replied.

"Huh?"

"Food poisoning."

Still, that was enough for Meg to follow.

"I see. From its voice, it sure sounded like a glutton. So, resting as in *rest in peace*?"

"Not yet."

"Too bad," Meg said, and then she suddenly seemed to remember something and stood up with a gasp. "I've felt so safe with you around I forgot something. I've gotta make some harpoons. I'm gonna go see if I can find some promising branches."

"Stay in the light," D told her.

"Okay."

Meg went over to a nearby stand of trees and looked for some nice straight branches, but she didn't fare well as most were too short or crooked, Still, she managed to cut nearly a dozen and thought to herself, *These should do*, when in the stand of trees off to her right she spotted the perfect branch about eight or nine feet off the ground. Though she couldn't jump up and grab it, fortunately there were other branches growing about three feet below it. If she were to grab hold of one, then use it as a step, it looked like this might just work.

After a quick glance over to confirm D was there in the torchlight, Meg grabbed hold of the lower branch. Kicking off the tree trunk and climbing, she got to where the desired branch was right in front of her. Taking the knife she'd held between her teeth, she pressed the blade into the base of the branch, but at that instant there was a rustling overhead.

Looking up, Meg bugged her eyes. Not eight inches away, a man's face was peering down at her through the fog. From Meg's perspective, it was upside down. More surprising still, it was a face she recognized.

"Bo?!"

A heartbeat later, the young bounty hunter twisted his lips into a grin and was sucked into the darkness overhead, as if jerked back by some incredible force.

"What's Bo doing here?" the girl said to herself.

The encounter was so bizarre, it was strange Meg hadn't fallen right out of the tree. However, she made it safely back down to the ground. It came as little surprise she showed no intention of chasing after the bounty hunter.

“Be careful, D! I just saw—” she shouted, but on turning she gasped in astonishment.

There was no sign of D by the glow of the torch.

She called out his name in spite of herself.

The night grew deeper and deeper, with fog creeping across the ground and snaring on the trees. But Meg ran through night and fog. Not out of fear. Rather, she was concerned about D.

“Oh?!”

She was in a copse of trees about a hundred feet west of where D had vanished. In the center of a grassy area surrounded by enormous trees, D stood with both his sword and his right arm extending from his side.

“D!”

A split second before she called out to him, Meg caught sight of an object knifing through the air at him from his right. What jabbed into the ground a good ten feet shy of D was none other than a short spear.

“That’s Lancer’s spear. Is he here, too?!”

If he was, it was a sloppy throw. Meg couldn’t believe a seasoned professional would have his weapon fall so short of the mark. However, Meg’s thoughts abruptly changed. *Professionals don’t miss—which could only mean it was thrown there on purpose.*

The ground suddenly shook. The grassland and enormous trees were being swallowed by a massive subsidence a hundred feet in diameter.

“D?!”

Meg’s eyes bulged in their sockets. She’d just spotted the black-garbed vision of beauty floating in the air over the subsidence. No, he wasn’t actually floating. From where he’d stood he was headed in a beeline to his right—in a leap for the far edge of the sinkhole.

While the powerful arc of the Hunter’s leap was impressive, the sight of him sailing through the air was exquisite—and Meg got the feeling that beauty alone was enough to execute such a great bound. However, just then D’s movement went into disarray. The leap had been just a bit short, and he hung from the brink of the hole by one hand. Though he’d narrowly managed to grip his sword between his teeth, he was in no position to use it. This was truly a do-or-die situation—and the girl was left wondering if a child with a toy bow and arrow couldn’t shoot D through the heart and finish him off.

The wind whistled. Something skimmed by the girl's cheek. Unconsciously, she reached out with her right hand. The hard, sharp feel of it in her grip told Meg it was an arrow, which took her breath away.

On account of that, the girl wasn't able to stop the other two arrows whistling through the air in flight. They pierced D's upper body as he hung there like a bagworm.

"D?!" Meg shouted, and she was just about to run toward him when something hard and blisteringly hot sank into both her thighs. Tumbling forward onto the ground, the girl twisted herself around and saw the person who stood behind her. He fixed a fresh arrow into his undersized bow and pointed it at Meg. It was Bo.

"Don't go making trouble, Meg."

How ugly and mean his endearing smile had become. Perhaps the fault lay in the pair of fangs peeking from his curved lips.

"Bo—not you, too?"

"Well, I did get turned into one of the Nobility, and I don't think I was the only one," he said. "But now that I am one, it's pretty damn good. I don't have to chase my prey through deserts in summer like I used to, blood nearly boiling and always dehydrated. I don't have to freeze myself to the bone at the water's edge in the icy seas up north, shooting a hundred arrows just to bag a lousy target who's hiding behind a North Sea beast. Those old wounds in my right arm and left leg don't bother me no more, and new ones heal up lickety-split, no matter how bad they are. You know, Meg, I really wanna be a Hunter now!"

"You traitor!" Meg groaned. Though she knew Bo couldn't help it, his betrayal still came like a knife to the belly, making anger roil up within her.

"Traitor? That's a new one on me. The old me and the new me are like two whole different people. As different as a man is from a woman, Meg! To be a traitor, you have to know what it is you're doing, right? Well, I didn't get no time to hash it out before I was made one of the Nobility—a vampire. And when I saw what I'd become, I was pleased as punch! How about it, Meg? You gonna join us? I see the way you're eyeballing me now, but once you're one, we'll be bosom buddies. What say we swear our loyalty to one another and drink a toast in blood when we have ourselves a ceremony?"

"What kind of ceremony?" Meg asked, and her body shook. More than anger, it was out of repulsion.

"A wedding ceremony, of course! Now you've got me all bashful, making me come right out and say it. But that conversation will keep till later. Hey, Lancer, I'm about to put three arrows through the heart of our little bagworm. Once I do, bury him good with that 'avalanche

spear' of yours. A proper burial and everything! Are we conscientious Hunters or what?"

Bo cocked an ear in Meg's direction. His vampire hearing had caught something she'd mumbled.

"What was that?"

"I said you talk too much!" Meg shouted, spitting the words out like they were filth. "*A real man keeps his mouth shut and drinks Noparra Beer!*"

A long time ago, a troupe of puppeteers traveling the Frontier had come to the village by the sea. Their activities were sponsored by a beer company located in the higher latitudes. And aside from that line of commercial endorsement before, during, and after the show, the puppets had done the entire performance in pantomime.

Meg screamed. And that wasn't all. Seemingly having forgotten the pain of being shot through both thighs, she rose, braced her lower half properly, and hurled one of the branches she held.

III

Bo wasn't paying attention. Even after Meg got up, he still had his guard down. His mind didn't grasp what was happening until the instant he took Meg's branch right through the heart. The terrific impact pushed the end through his back, but as Bo was knocked back fifteen feet, he unleashed three arrows simultaneously.

Meg bounded, a branch in her right hand, and though she managed to strike down two of them, she missed the third arrow.

"D?!"

At that moment, the brink of the enormous hole D was clinging to gave way with stupefying ease, plummeting along with the gorgeous figure to the bottom of a new thirty-foot-wide subsidence.

"D?! D?!" Meg cried, her body quavering as if she were suffering some kind of fit. It wasn't that she held him dear. But a thing of beauty had been destroyed—and she found that unforgivable.

Spinning around, she dashed over to Bo. The pseudo-vampire lay on his back, and she straddled him, savagely jabbing his own arrows into his chest and face. Eyes and nose, lips and teeth all melted into a bloody morass, and the geysering blood deflated his shredded heart. His spine and skull, ribs and collarbones were all smashed to powder, like seasoning for the pulpy soup of flesh and blood.

Somewhere, the night cried out. Its voice took the form of a gunshot.

Meg twisted her upper body around, and it was a second later that she returned to her senses. The direction she'd turned wasn't that of the gunshot, but rather that of the subsequent scream.

“Cowboy . . . you son of a bitch. How could you do that to one of your own . . .”

The voice was one she knew. Lancer’s. The moonlight, fog, and trees had all kept him hidden from Meg’s view. Lancer had been shot. And there was only one person it could’ve been!

“Don’t make me laugh, servant of the Nobility, scum of the earth. The least you can do is let one of my bullets show you the way to hell.”

She still couldn’t see the source of that wild voice. But Meg felt like she had a million friends now.

“You’re okay, eh, Meg?!” the rifleman called out, Lancer forgotten for the moment. “Yeah, I know what you’re thinking. I’m fit as a fiddle. Hold on and I’ll be right there as soon as I’m done with him.”

“The hell you say, human!” Lancer snarled. The anger just seemed to boil up in him, and Meg felt a little panicky. But his anger dissipated in no time. “I’ve known where you were for a good long time,” he continued calmly. “You can follow after D!”

Something knifed through the wind, and a few seconds later the ground quaked. The roar of the natural disaster sent the fog rolling back, then rushing in again.

“Cowboy!” Meg shouted, standing rooted in place. She wasn’t afraid of Lancer. For she’d heard the crack of a rifle a split second before his short spear had created another massive subsidence in the ground. And immediately after it, Lancer’s scream.

“Cowboy! Lancer!”

There was no answer.

Who had won? She didn’t know. Who had lost? She couldn’t tell.

Once again the tears streamed from the girl. Then she murmured D’s name and began walking along the brink of the double sinkhole.

It was about forty minutes later that, choosing a massive tree with a solid-looking trunk, roots, and branches, Meg undid a reel of wire taken from Bo’s belt, wrapped one end around the tree trunk, and descended into the hole. For weapons, she had ten of Bo’s arrows tucked through her belt.

The jumble of dirt, rocks, and trees had stopped at a depth of about seventy feet. The ground was a dangerous minefield of holes covered in dirt which Meg skillfully navigated, but on coming to the center of the subsidence, she groaned, “Oh, God!”

The top of one of the trees had snapped off at an angle, and the young man in black was impaled on the tip of it. His body was bowed like a crescent moon, with three of Bo’s arrows imbedded in his chest and the top of the tree trunk piercing him just above the waist. Despite the horrific sight he presented, the young man’s chest still rose and fell, and Meg was chilled to see that his right hand grasped his

sword.

Before the girl could call out his name, D moved his right hand under himself—longsword still in its grip—and grabbed hold of the trunk that pierced him. As the girl watched, he lifted his body up with the strength of one arm, and a moment later he rolled at Meg's feet. The sound of that wooden stake tearing free of his flesh echoed in Meg's ears.

With the same hand the Hunter grabbed all three arrows at once, pulled them out, and discarded them.

Meg was speechless.

"You . . . okay?" she asked, but naturally that was only after D had caught his breath.

"More or less."

"To survive that . . . you dhampirs must be something else."

"What happened to the bowman?" D asked.

"He's dead. I . . ."

At that point she followed D's line of sight and noticed that she was covered in gore from chest to waist. She'd been spattered with Bo's blood.

"How's your condition?"

"Awful—or that's what I'd tell you, but pretty good. It's like I never run out of stamina."

"If we stay here, Nobles will be coming soon," said D. "But when I'm punctured by wood, it's slow to heal. Give me blood."

He said it so matter-of-factly.

"Okay," the girl promptly replied, and then she went pale, "What am I saying?! Not a chance!"

"It doesn't matter where, just make a light cut somewhere. A mouthful will do."

"No, that's disgusting. It's like some kind of Noble ritual. I don't wanna see you drinking blood!"

"There's no time. Any minute now . . ."

"I said 'no,' and I mean, 'NO!'" Meg exclaimed, her body quaking.

Nobles and blood are just the worst things imaginable. All I ever wanted was a life fishing.

Just then, something like a wire came down from overhead and wrapped around Meg's waist.

A needle of rough wood flew from D's right hand, but from a far greater height a voice remarked, "It's no use, D. I'm up in the stratosphere. If you want the girl, come to the castle. That is, supposing you manage to hack your way through the failures I've sent out here for you."

Gildea's voice had rained down, and in no time at all Meg had been hauled away into the air.

D followed for a while, but he soon turned his eyes to his feet. He'd just noticed that when he'd hurled the needle at his lofty foe, his left hand had fallen out of the coat pocket where he'd stashed it. His moon-shaming beauty and his intrepid figure showed neither hesitation nor fear. But after taking three arrows and a tree trunk through his upper body, how would D get through this without the left hand, an energy supply of sorts for him?

Look. Up on the rim of the subsidence, ephemeral figures shrouded in murderous intent jostled against each other. Crimson was the color of hunger. With two points of that hue set in their pale faces, the undead panted and waited to see who would be on the receiving end of the coming slaughter.

Bidding Farewell

chapter 9

I

In the fog blurry figures met. However, above them the moon shone at its zenith, and beneath their feet stars twinkled. The two of them were in a long, long corridor with no end in sight.

"I haven't seen Lord Danae. Where has he gone?" asked the voice of Baron Gildea.

"Might he not be downstairs in the wine cellar?" said Zangleson.

In light of where the two of them were, their conversation seemed a little strange—actually *very* strange.

The baron clicked his tongue loudly and said, "Ever the carefree one. Though it's been said he was bringing the human woman Duchess Mizuki wished to meet."

"He cares more for drink than for women."

"Hmm," the baron replied noncommittally. "The underground levels, you say? Had it ever occurred to you they might have a connection to the outside?"

"Those on surveillance check them daily."

"Inside and outside are in different phases. A gap a micron wide would be a rift three feet wide in here."

"Is something troubling you?" Zangleson inquired.

"I just have the feeling I saw a figure."

"A figure, you say?"

The fog enveloped the pair—and then receded.

"It matters not. Surely I must be mistaken," said the baron. "More importantly, I am most curious as to why Duchess Mizuki should wish to meet with that girl."

"Another bad habit—one I hope you will keep in check."

"Understood. I have been charged with another duty of great importance. Zangleson, do you think I can triumph over that man?"

Silence shrouded the aged steward. The fog crept stealthily across the ground, clung to him, and then pulled away as if realizing it'd made a mistake.

"If there is any chance of victory—"

"Yes?"

"—it may well hinge on the fact that we are dead, while he is neither dead nor alive. In a battle where lives and souls are on the line, that ambiguity is a powerful enemy."

“If I were to input a specific field of battle into the computer, it might be able to create a new weapon. My thanks, Zangleson. I believe I feel like doing this now.”

The baron left at a good clip.

Training his gaze to the right, the aged steward mused, “Despite what I said to the baron, Duchess Mizuki and a human girl is an odd combination—bizarre, even. A conversation between a Noble and human—perhaps relating to life and the soul, I wonder?”

He murmured the words in a tone that was terribly weary, yet also full of expectation.

Meg was in the fog. She wondered if she wasn’t perhaps in a jail. But to either side of her there was only mist.

The instant Baron Gildea’s line had wrapped around her, her whole body had been paralyzed and she’d lost consciousness. The next thing she knew, she was here.

“Is anybody there?” the girl shouted, but on seeing that there was no reply she quickly got to her feet.

Oddly enough, there was nothing wrong with Meg. In fact, every inch of her seemed full of energy. She had no trouble moving around.

“So good of you to come,” said a voice from the fog up ahead.

Well, the boss is here, the girl thought.

It was a woman’s voice. Meg could tell she must’ve been beautiful beyond imagining. However, those who heard her voice had frost form on their chests, and before they knew it their hearts were dying.

“I am Duchess Mizuki Dandorian, commander of the conversion center. And I would have your name.”

“Meg Stow. I’m the darling of a fishing village!”

The girl got the worst possible reaction—no reaction at all.

She doesn’t know what to make of me, either, I guess, she thought.

But then the woman’s voice said, “Are you acquainted with *this*?”

Something came flying, pushing its way through the fog to fall at Meg’s feet. It made a sound like meat being tenderized. The naked woman who’d fallen flat on her back stared up at Meg with the vacant eyes of the dead.

“That’s—”

“It’s the woman who rendered you unconscious and put you into a conversion pod. What’s more, she actually had wits enough to operate that pod.”

“A conversion pod . . . ?”

A sensation of cold rising from the pit of her stomach turned Meg into a corpse. What had happened back there after she’d lost consciousness?

“Since that time, have you not found yourself different?”

The Noblewoman’s answer had been another question.

Meg didn't know what to say.

"You give no answer. That *is* your answer," said the duchess. "Very well, let me ask you this: since that time, have you felt fatigued?"

Nothing from Meg.

"How about pain?"

No reply.

"Fright, then?"

Nothing.

"When in combat, did you ever think you might be defeated?"

Silence.

"One final question," the woman said, her voice seeming to carry laughter. "Do you detest blood?"

"Stop it!" Meg shouted shrilly, kicking at the floor.

The girl sought some outlet for the anger surging through every inch of her body. However, it was fear that propped up that anger. To rid herself of that fear, Meg was going to bring her anger to bear on the woman in the fog.

Not there. Or there. Or there.

She ran. And ran.

The fog alone went on and on.

Meg halted and looked all around.

The voice came to her, saying, "Not even short of breath. You ran eleven hundred yards in thirty-two seconds and you aren't even tired, are you?"

"So what? That's because I'm in good shape from being out on the sea!"

"Hmm. Well, the sea doesn't have this."

Meg's field of view was dyed red. An enormous volume of liquid had been dumped over her head. It was warm, and it had *that* color.

"It's blood," the woman's voice informed her dispassionately. "A human would bellow about how loathsome it was. They would feel filthy and need to wash it off. But what about you?"

"That's a dumb question! I feel the same!" Meg shouted as loudly as she could.

"Whatever is the matter? I can't hear you," the woman replied.

"Huh?"

That's a dumb question! I feel the same!

"I still can't hear you," the woman laughed. "Your voice won't come out. Not with your tongue out like that."

Before she'd even finished listening to what the woman had said, Meg grasped the meaning of the words. Her tongue was licking at the blood running down her cheek!

"I . . . I . . . I . . ."

Like a woman possessed, the girl pulled her tongue back in and

spit.

"How is the taste?"

"Vile. It's disgusting!"

Meg swung her head wildly from side to side. *What the hell would I know about the taste of blood? It was salty. Tasting of iron. Not good. So disgusting . . . So . . . So . . . Oh . . . So delicious.*

"That one came to me and boasted how she had made you just like herself."

By "that one," the duchess meant the woman who lay there.

"The conversion affects people differently. In your case, hmm—you are an ideal specimen. The question is, how long will you last?"

A chill pierced the girl from the top of her head down to her crotch.

"How long? What do you mean by that?"

"I wish to ask you something," the duchess said, ignoring Meg's question. "Do you yet wish to save your compatriots?"

"I, er, yeah, of course I do. That's why I came here!"

"I can let you have them back."

"What?"

A fresh shock speared through the girl's body.

"I refer to your fellow villagers. A number of them are as yet human. And I will return them to you in that state. However—"

Meg's body stiffened.

"—you are to aid us in destroying that man, D."

"Stop talking nonsense. Why would I have to kill him?!"

"Because you are his enemy now."

Meg thought her blood had actually frozen. That, because she had actually nodded at the duchess's words.

"Your heart may not yet accept it, but your body knows," the duchess said in a rather detached tone. "Listen to me, and deceive yourself no longer. You can already feel it. You may run him through with this."

There was a hard clatter at her feet. It was unclear exactly where they'd found it, but it was Meg's harpoon.

"Look—here he comes!"

Meg heard the sound of footsteps approaching from up ahead.

"This, in exchange for your compatriots. Not a bad bargain. Quickly, run him through the heart!"

When the footsteps were about fifteen feet away, D took shape. He was approaching without ever stopping.

"He still thinks you're human," the duchess told Meg. "You could slay him with ease now. Catch him unaware and stab the life from him. And then your compatriots may safely return to your village. You shall become my true servant. And blood will make your body tremble

with the joy of living."

D now stood right in front of Meg. His eyes were so cold they seemed to regard anyone before him as stone, but now they gazed at Meg with a gentle warmth.

A rising emotion she couldn't keep in check made Meg's heart quaver. He was beautiful—and that alone was enough to steal her heart.

Meg shook her muddled head and readied her harpoon. D didn't move. The girl screamed something unintelligible even to herself. The harpoon flew. Meg watched dazedly as it sank into the stone floor and shook violently.

"I can't do it," the girl said. "How could I kill somebody to save somebody else? I'd rather do this first."

Meg extricated the harpoon. It felt terribly cold when she put it against the nape of her neck. She slashed the carotid artery open, and her body toppled with a geyser of blood.

In no time the twitching had stopped, and from the depths of the fog a voice said, "When something is gained, something must be lost. However, sometimes either will do . . . Zangleson, put the girl in the cage down below."

The pain in her throat woke Meg up. And then her eyes went wide. Watching over her was a heavy darkness. A pale green light spilled from somewhere, revealing an expanse of stone chunks about thirty feet ahead of her.

Before even wondering where she was, Meg put one hand to her throat and murmured, "I should've known, if it's not a stake to the heart—I can't die."

Just then, across the stony blocks there was a bizarre, almost carnivorous snarl. A black shape was moving around.

"I wonder if getting my head bitten off would destroy me?" the girl mused. "Okay, bring it on."

Meg got up and beckoned to her black foe. Her high spirits were due to the confidence she had in her now-vampiric body.

Suddenly the restless black figure leapt, landing about ten feet in front of Meg. He wore an azure cape and a mask. His right hand grasped a longsword.

Meg stood there without saying a word. Surprise had bitten off her tongue, and grief had sewn her mouth shut.

"Wesley . . . That's you, isn't it?"

There was no answer, and he came at her with the sword. His speed was faster than Meg's eyes could follow. The *old* Meg's eyes.

The flash of silver was aimed at her neck, but Meg bent backward just enough to narrowly evade it, then shot her foot out at Wesley's shin.

Wesley's shin shattered. As he fell, he spun himself around hard. His grip on the longsword had changed briefly, and Meg couldn't follow the weapon's movements.

A swirl of light filled the girl's retinas, and from there the glint streaked toward her chest with a tail like a shooting star's. A blistering heat slid into her between the breasts. A scream spilled from Meg. Her brain seemed about to explode. The world was stained crimson.

I'm finished, she thought.

Are you okay, Meg? someone whispered. *I didn't stab you through the heart.*

In an instant she understood.

Wesley?!

Use the sword to stab me, he whispered to her. *It's the only way to save yourself. I'm under orders. I can't fight them.*

II

"Why you? Did that woman make you do this?" the girl asked.

That's right.

Meg felt her whole body tremble like she had the ague. For the first time in her life she was shaken by the urge to murder somebody else.

The duchess had deduced the relationship between Meg and the man. She knew how Meg felt. And how Wesley felt, too. And that was why she'd sent him to assassinate Meg. Making him kill the woman he loved—could there be any more twisted form of entertainment?

Still gripping the longsword, Wesley twisted it around with both hands.

Meg writhed in a pain beyond description.

Take this. Stab me. Fulfill your purpose here!

"Wesley," Meg said, almost in a whisper. "Kiss me."

Her human lips met those of the mask. The kiss that should've been shared in another world here had the taste of blood to it.

"Oooooh!" Meg shouted, springing back up. Power was filling her. For the mask had been spattered with Meg's blood.

Wesley had been slammed into a wall a good fifteen feet away, and Meg bounded for him. In midair she grabbed the handle of the longsword with both hands and pushed. The tip of it poked out her back.

"Wesley, we'll be together *on the other side!*"

Her voice spun around.

As Wesley was pinned against the wall, Meg crashed into him back first. The blade protruding from her back pierced Wesley's chest. She didn't know whether it was through the heart or not. It had just been

instinct. However, through the blade Meg could distinctly feel the thumping of Wesley's heart. It was quickly growing weaker. Meg hadn't erred in her aim.

The longsword had stopped at its hilt. The tip had gone through the chests of both Meg and Wesley, and was imbedded in the stone wall.

"Meg . . ."

When he said her name right in her ear, his voice was awfully calm —the sort of voice that presaged whispered words of love.

Tears spilled from Meg's eyes.

But that was all there ever was—

Meg extracted the longsword. There was only resistance from the wall before Meg pulled it from her own body.

When one of the vampires' companions was destroyed, there was no telling what form they'd take. In most cases, it depended on how much time had passed since they'd first been drained and changed, though there were exceptions to this.

Meg turned around. The cape and mask were covered with gray dust.

Squatting down, Meg picked up the mask and gently pressed it to her cheek. There were a million things she wanted to say, but she couldn't decide which to let past her lips.

"Wesley."

That was all there was.

Though Meg wanted to stay like that forever, her self-imposed mission made her get to her feet again.

Setting the mask back down in the ash, she said, "I'll come back for you."

Turning around, she spotted the iron door beyond all the rocks. *It's probably locked*, she thought, *but a vampire's strength might be able to do something about that.*

There was no need for that. Before Meg could even touch the door it swung wide, revealing a blond man in a crimson cape.

"Ah?!" was all Meg said as she stiffened.

This was the one Noble she didn't know how to handle.

It was Lord Danae who made the first move. Clapping a hand on her shoulder, he broke into a grin and said, "You're safe, I see." He then eyed her from head to toe, at which point his expression grew dour for a moment, then quickly gave way to a carefree smile. "So, you've become one of us, have you? Oh, that's splendid."

"Spare me!" Meg shouted, all the while trying to keep the anger off her face. "It's not like I'm one out of choice. So don't you dare go thinking how convenient it is that you guys have got a new servant."

"Don't say such heartless things," Danae said with a wry grin. "I

still owe you a debt. I raced here so you wouldn't die before it was repaid. Why, I was astonished when I heard the duchess had captured you and had you thrown into the battle cage in the basement!"

Meg's eyes went wide. Could it be this Nobleman had come to save her?

"You're here to help me?"

"I suppose I am."

Conceited though Danae's retort seemed, it didn't annoy the girl. At the very least, he was trying to keep his promise to a human.

"But I'm surprised you were fine. Who was your opponent?"

Meg shook her head. That seemed enough for Danae to understand.

"Ah. You mean to say it was that boy? Duchess Mizuki can be so cruel. To order a man who loved you to fight you to the death."

"That's just how Nobles are!" Meg spat. "But he protected me right to the bitter end. Even though they made him a Noble, and dressed him like one. I swear I'll never be like the rest of you, either. And I'll save the villagers if it's the last thing I do."

"You are welcome to do as you wish in that matter. I can take you to them," Danae said.

"What?"

"Before I could fulfill my promise to bring you to the castle, you came here on your own. That being the case, I have no choice but to bring you to your compatriots."

"Are you sure?" Meg asked, astounded. "But that'll make you a traitor!"

"Anyone concerned about being labeled a traitor has no business being a Noble in the first place."

"That's so cool," Meg murmured, but Danae seemed unfamiliar with the expression and merely furrowed his brow. He was a Noble, after all.

"Well, shall we go?"

The two of them set off. They were in a corridor. Both the ceiling and the walls had exposed pipes running along them like veins.

Turning, Danae said, "Where has that damned Zangleson gone?"

"Here I am," replied a voice from the ceiling.

"What's this?"

When Danae looked up, Meg could sense the tension that filled his body. And she probably wasn't the only one.

Meg and Danae were in a passageway that intersected a thirty-foot-wide corridor—and the girl saw a pair of figures up above looking down at them. One was a white-haired old man clearly dressed as a servant; the other wore a gray cape and had bandages wrapped around his hands and face. For an instant Meg thought the

latter to be a patient, but his bloodshot eyes—the sole part of him exposed—gave off a supernatural aura so intense it almost blinded her. And apparently the eyes alone were enough for Danae to deduce his identity.

"Duke Dandorian?! Whatever has happened to you . . ." the astonished Danae groaned, and Meg was immediately dumbfounded.

This was the husband that vile duchess had jilted in her love for D? But he had such a force to him. She found it inconceivable that he was some dimwitted husband who'd been cuckolded.

"When did you return to the castle?" Danae inquired in a shrill tone. Given how terribly surprised he seemed, this was apparently someone who wasn't to be taken lightly.

"He has come and gone a number of times, in secrecy," Zangleson replied. He was the very picture of a loyal retainer, but that loyalty extended to only one person.

"You led him here?" Danae said, his voice and his eyes suddenly growing cruel.

"Correct, sir. Though his grace the duke had no intention of returning to the castle, I insisted on bringing him here after seeing him wandering the forest alone. He seemed so unfortunate . . ."

Nothing from Danae.

"You know none of it, do you, Lord Danae?" the bandaged figure said, his voice coming down in a gloomy tone that seemed like it would melt away in the rain. "Why was it we returned to life? Because my wife wished to see that man once more! However, when I was raised from the dead, I made a demand. I said there was no price I'd be unwilling to pay to gain power equal to that of the loathsome young man, so that I might have my vengeance on him."

Danae said nothing, and beside him Meg was stunned.

Duke Dandorian touched his right hand to his face and continued, "And so I was given this body. Supernatural bacteria eat away at me beneath these bandages. By turns fever and chills pain my every second, so that even sleep is impossible. Ah, yes, the pain is like that of a burned body being splashed with acid multiplied ten thousandfold. Yet I rejoice, Lord Danae. It pleases me that the man who stole my wife will die by my hand."

"What he stole was her grace's heart," Danae said with resolve. "Even now, that is unchanged. Duke Dandorian, though this resurrection has been a boon for most of us, for you and her grace—"

"Say no more. I must think no longer of Mizuki. I have only my hatred for the man who took what was mine!"

"Wait just a minute!" Meg interjected, driven by something that'd welled up inside her. "Is that what this is? All this started because your wife has a cheating habit even death couldn't fix? You came back

to this life for revenge over having your wife stolen? That's the stupidest thing ever. Think for a second about all the trouble you've caused everybody else. Some of the folks from my village got changed in strange ways, or killed. In order to save me, the sheriff I came over with let me . . . well, he died. And then there's the matter of me ending up like this . . . And it's all because of your wife's lousy playing around and your stupid jealousy . . . I could just die!"

The girl's voice quaked, and there was a salty taste in her mouth. Tears.

"Oh, we can't have you dying on us."

Dandorian's words hammered Meg.

III

Bloodshot eyes were gazing intently at her from between the bandages.

"What's that supposed to mean?" the girl asked.

"You're to be our bait for D. Let me be plain, it isn't that I fear him. No, I wish to torment him."

"That's just too damn bad," Meg spat venomously. "You think he'll show any interest in a little country girl like me? It's not sunburned skin that suits him, iwt's a classy woman with skin like pearls. She wouldn't wear a shell necklace like me, but gold accessories with jewels like you Nobles use, and she'd be real good at wearing 'em. And then, some night when the moon and stars are bright, they'd go out into a garden where beautiful flowers are in bloom, and she'd sing the songs of the night in a voice prettier than any flower."

Having said all that, Meg took a deep breath. Without her realizing it, Dandorian had come right down in front of her, and now his left hand was wrapped around her right wrist. A pain not unlike a kind of chill spread through Meg's body, and she couldn't lift a finger.

"I am of the opinion that young man isn't as coldblooded as he appears. I look forward to seeing his reaction when a female acquaintance is ripped to pieces before his very eyes."

Every inch of the girl went cold at once. *Quit it!* she shouted, but the words never formed, and when Meg tried to wrench free of the duke's grip she moved him no more than a breeze-borne feather might have.

When Duke Dandorian moved, Meg began to go with him as if she were floating along.

"Kindly wait a moment," Danae said, standing before them.

"What do you want? There must be a pile of operations which need your attention!"

"I am abundantly aware of that. However, first, I owe a debt to

that girl."

"A debt?" asked the duke.

"Can you not wait until that debt has been repaid?"

"I know not what this debt may be, but the answer is no. The girl is mine."

"Please reconsider."

"Step aside."

The duke's right arm arced out toward Danae's shoulder. It sliced through empty air. Danae had swayed back beautifully.

"Danae!"

The duke's reaction was a second too slow. Twin beams of red pierced Dandorian's shoulders and eyes at almost the same time. The beams' hundred million degrees of temperature could stave off even the regenerative powers of a Noble's indestructible cells for quite some time.

As the duke dropped dejectedly to his knees, Danae pulled Meg close and said, "I shall take my punishment later. I'm off to bring the girl to the confinement center for the test subjects."

And with that he turned his back on the duke.

After walking about thirty feet, Danae halted. He turned around.

Flattened snakes were trailing along at his feet. They carpeted the corridor, and the instant he realized they were the same bandages that Duke Dandorian wore, Danae shoved Meg forward and prepared to make a leap.

The time he'd given Meg meant he was too late. The bandages wrapped around Danae's ankles in midair and dragged him back down the corridor, where the other flattened snakes wrapped around him en masse and tightened. Flesh popped and bones creaked. A scream of pain and bloody foam erupted from Danae's mouth.

"I shall tear you to bits, Lord Danae," Duke Dandorian told him as he staggered to his feet, his words like a hex. "Take off your arms, your legs—even your head. And then I shall impale your torso on a pike."

"How very . . . thoughtful . . ." Danae said, his body left looking like some horribly misshapen monstrosity from the bandages sinking into his flesh.

There was a dull snap. His ribs had broken.

Disgorging another gout of blood, Danae's lips twisted into a grin.

The dazzling red beams swiped vertically, cutting all the bandages. The light then pointed upward. Not at the duke, but at the ceiling. It was unclear what sort of path the beams traced, but the duke was crushed beneath several tons of rock that fell a heartbeat later. As if from a nuclear explosion, a rumble and a dusty wind howled down the corridor.

“Are you okay?!” Meg asked, running over to Danae’s twisted form.

“You mustn’t come near me—these bandages are poisoned!” the Noble exclaimed, shoving Meg away. “To reach the confinement center, go straight until you get to the vertical conveyor, take that to the surface, and head north. There are ten black buildings there. They are in the third from the eastern side. Go quickly.”

Meg hesitated.

“What about you?”

“As I expected, even Duke Dandorian has his limits,” Danae said. “Crushed so thoroughly, he won’t be too quick to heal. Go on ahead.”

“But you’ll be coming later?” Meg asked, suddenly feeling helpless. At the same time, she was also concerned for the Nobleman. At the very least, he had done his best to honor the promise he’d made to a human girl.

“I know not,” Danae replied, gazing at Meg. “Hurry and go. Make good your escape. I must warn you that once you reach the confinement center, my promise to you ends. When next we meet, you will be just one more of my prey.”

His eyes were blazing red, and a disturbing pair of fangs poked from the corners of his mouth.

Meg backed away. Not out of fear. Rather, it was to sever her emotional ties to Lord Danae.

“I’ll cross that sea when I get to it. So long. You’ve been a big help.”

Something glistened in Meg’s eyes.

Perhaps noticing it, Danae raised one hand and said, “Godspeed to you.”

His eyes were invested with a warm and peaceful glow, and his fangs couldn’t be seen.

Meg started running. Tears slid down her cheeks. And that was another way of bidding farewell.

“So, the brave girl has left?”

After Meg’s footfalls were no longer audible, Danae looked down at the far end of the corridor—and the stony heap of rubble. Would his own cells fill in his pulverized flesh quickly, or would Duke Dandorian recover from being crushed first? It was a race against the clock.

The pain was receding. The regenerative abilities of Lord Danae’s cells were beginning to have some effect.

“This may work,” he thought aloud, and then his Noble hearing caught a sound that should’ve struck terror in him. The sound of a small piece of stone hitting the floor.

Danae focused his eyes past his feet. There was a mountain of

stone. Beneath it was the duke.

Hurry up and heal, damn you!

The mountain of stone shook distinctly.

Running all the way, it took the girl ten minutes to reach the confinement center. She couldn't locate any doors in the building's metallic surface. Though Meg kicked and punched at it, it had no effect at all. She was just considering going back to look for some sort of tool when she sensed a presence behind her that froze her body. It was a ghastly aura on a completely different level from any of the others she'd met, and it made Meg's heart stop.

I'm dead. I'm going to die just like this.

Her consciousness drifted away.

Without warning, the presence vanished. Staggering, Meg fell to the ground, then propped herself up with one arm. Desperately craning her neck, she looked back.

"D?!"

It didn't even occur to the girl that this might be some illusion the duchess had conjured.

"So, you're okay?"

Though the girl knew D was merely confirming her condition, a shudder of emotion ran through her.

"Of course," she spat back, just so he wouldn't see through her.

"It would seem you haven't concluded your business here yet," D said, shooting a quick glance at the building before turning his back to Meg.

His treatment of her was so callous, Meg didn't even think before shouting, "Hey—aren't you being a little too cold? Gimme some help here!"

Not halting, D asked, "With what?"

Knowing that he wasn't the kind to ask about other's affairs, Meg felt her chest swell with hope.

"I wanna get into this building, but I can't find an entrance. Can't you do something?"

D didn't stop.

"The folks from the village are in here! I've finally found them. All I have to do is get 'em out and put 'em in a boat. Please, get this place open."

D turned around. Not even glancing at Meg, he walked toward the building.

Yes! Meg thought, pumping a fist in her heart of hearts.

Halting by the front of the building, D pulled something weird out of his coat.

"Is that—your left hand?"

Meg said nothing more, watching as D used his right hand to press the palm of the severed left hand against the wall before him. In the section around it, an area ten feet high and six feet wide changed color.

Though it was a metal wall, the Hunter tossed his chin at the part that'd turned pale blue and seemed to be breathing, saying, "The rest you should know—the way you are now."

He looked at Meg.

Meg really wondered if her heart was going to stop. *He knows. He knows I've been turned into a servant of the Nobility!* And she had to wonder why, then, the Vampire Hunter had bothered to aid her.

"D—I . . . I'm . . ."

"See to it we don't have to meet again."

Meg's pained confession was met with a tone that seemed to reduce it to fog, and then D started once again down the same road. Just before his broad back melded with the darkness, the girl managed to squeeze out a cry of "Thank you!" And then, in her heart of hearts, she murmured, *I love you!*

"Poor thing," said the hoarse voice. "The girl wound up with the blood of the Nobility. You tried to tell her. Seems she's in love with you. And yet—"

D struck the chest of his coat with his fist. There was a squeal, and then it grew quiet.

The Hunter's walk, quiet but shrouded in an aura so ghastly people would want to cover their eyes, ended quickly. When he came to just about the center of a vast, square-like area, a figure surrounded by four cylinders flew down from the sky, halting about fifteen feet off the ground.

"Do you remember me? I'm Gildea," the baron informed D, flames of enmity clinging to every inch of the Nobleman.

Dust to Dust

chapter 10

I

I won't say that I was caught off-guard," said Baron Gildea. "I was bested by your true power. Even now my throat burns like fire. How fortunate for me that I have an opportunity to avenge myself here. D, can you prevent my attacks when I am beyond the range of your blade or those needles you throw?"

There was no answer.

"Long ago, when you destroyed this island, I didn't do battle with you or even know your name, as the flames engulfed me while I slumbered. Who would've thought the very day I was transferred to the island would be the day of its destruction? But now I'm overjoyed to have had the chance to battle you not once but twice. I know not whether you are bold or just dull witted, venturing defenseless into a Noble base as you have."

"It was the same last time," the Hunter replied.

His voice, like holy winter's night, made Gildea's expression stiffen.

"I see. And this time, too, you will see us all destroyed? Such confidence! However, I will remind you that last time, you didn't fight me."

"You said it yourself just now. I bested you."

The baron's body rose vertically.

One of the cylinders made a faint mechanical buzz. Abnormal conditions were broadcast into the space around D. The instant the Hunter kicked off the dirt, the ground in a six-foot-diameter area around where he'd been standing suddenly subsided. Or rather, it'd been compressed by an incredible increase in gravity. Not only could the four cylinders negate gravity, but they were also designed to be used as weapons, creating a force field that could compact things down to the atomic level. The ground that'd subsided had been reduced to ash to a depth of six miles.

The Hunter wouldn't be able to dodge a second attack.

On landing, D drew his sword and hurled it at the airborne baron all in a single motion. Their duel was taking place across a thousand yards.

When Baron Gildea saw D's right arm sweep around, a mocking sneer rose on his lips. He'd already risen another five hundred yards.

It was a futile attempt.

Gildea's mocking sneer became a look of pity. At the same time the gravity controller in front of him had shaken faintly, something cold and hard had sunk into his heart. The gravity controllers would probably have him at the edge of the atmosphere in no time, though its undead pilot had already been reduced to dust.

"Looks like I made it in time," a hoarse voice said feebly from the chest of the Hunter's black coat. "A millisecond more and you would've been crushed down to the size of an atom. But now that you've lost your weapon, you're in a bit of a dilemma as to what to do next—huh?"

Even before the hoarse voice noticed, D had turned his face slightly toward the rear—the direction he'd encountered Meg.

"The girl's fighting the good fight, eh? Well, nothing to worry about in her present position. On the other hand, what'll you do if it comes down to that? Oh, I suppose you'd probably finish her off without raising an eyebrow."

Before the voice had even finished speaking, D turned his face forward again and started off, the wind whipping in his wake.

The mechanism for opening and closing the door was immediately to the right of the section of wall that'd changed color. That Meg understood.

Slipping through it without meeting any resistance, she stepped into a vast room. Though there was no illumination, Meg's eyes could make out a half-dozen figures lying on the ridiculously broad expanse of floor.

"Togill's little boy . . . Shalkan's wife, and Old Man Ong . . ."

Familiar faces were arrayed there. Anger ensnared Meg. Old folks and kids had been thrown in there without a single bed, left to sleep on the floor. That was no way for anyone to treat a human being.

Togill's boy was the closest to her, but before Meg bent down over him she first checked her own teeth. They poked into her fingertip painfully. It seemed it would be best to talk as little as possible. A desolate wind blew through the girl's heart.

After a look at his throat to confirm there were no marks there, Meg called out to the little boy, who woke up immediately. Telling him not to say anything, she woke the other villagers. There were twenty of them. They were all that remained. All the rest had stained D's blade.

Resisting the urge to crumble, Meg led the people outside. She planned to hide them in the forest for the time being, and get them on

the move again with the coming of daybreak. Fleeing through the night would be akin to running into the Nobility's arms, but Meg also didn't know whether or not she herself would be able to act once the sun came up. It seemed highly unlikely. At any rate, she'd get them away from there, and once they're reached somewhere the Nobles wouldn't find them, she'd have them split up and make a break for the bay, each on their own.

As the girl was leading the villagers toward the exit, her charges still half dazed since waking, she got the feeling something cold had hit her back, so she halted.

The villagers were all staring at her. It wasn't the sort of look they'd give a compatriot who'd come to rescue them.

It can't be . . . Not again, Meg thought, turning around slowly.

Red lights were blinking in darkness. She didn't need to count them to know exactly how many there were.

"I'm too late, right?" Meg murmured. Something in her heart crumbled.

"When we become like the Nobility, the marks on our throats disappear," Togill's son said. "It happened with all of us. You can be one of us, too, miss."

Meg sensed the throng suddenly closing in. Hard hands latched onto her arms.

"Old Man Ong . . ." the girl said in a worn, threadbare voice.

"Age before beauty, as they say. Would you let me have a mouthful? Of your warm blood, that is."

A number of hands touched her shoulders, pulled at the cuffs of her sleeves. Everyone wanted it. They all asked for a share, even if it were just a little. Everyone was famished.

Meg knew it was too late now.

"Miss," the little boy said to her urgently.

Meg gazed sadly at the fangs that poked from his mouth.

"Well, okay. That is, if you don't mind the same blood all the rest of you have," Meg laughed. There was nothing to do but laugh. That was the quickest way to settle the matter.

Meg felt her fangs come out. Astonished groans swept through the shadowy figures like a wave. They backed away without another word.

"Good-bye," Meg told them, and then she slipped out the door.

Her eyes were drawn to the figure who stood a short distance away. Duke Daios Dandorian's cape and bandages fluttered in the night wind.

"Danae is destroyed," he said.

Somewhere in Meg's heart, ripples of pointlessness spread. That was all.

"Come with me," the duke said.

Meg nodded. "Okay," she said. "Take me wherever you're going."

At that time, Meg was fully aware that she was still in her right mind.

Countless figures were coming and going at the dome. Night was the Nobility's world. The solemn splendor of their fancy balls and many other forms of nightlife had been gorgeously preserved in paintings and written accounts. However, this wasn't the clustered palaces of the Capital, and the shadowy figures who navigated the fairly opulent corridors and staircases in the company of the fog were all androids. Both the light fixtures and the glow of the moon spilling in through enormous windows cast long shadows behind them that would've been unthinkable from Nobles. Even in this research facility on an island at the ends of the earth, the Nobles couldn't help but build a place of misleading beauty. The chilling solitude of such places had been both pointed out and analyzed by numerous scholars.

There were also maintenance personnel, of course. When analytic systems tripped by sensors determined D was a foe, said personnel stood ready with dimensional cannons, but each and every one of them shut down after being bathed in blue light. That glow came from D's pendant.

After a short journey—actually, just a walk—D reached his destination. He knew that there he would find the person he sought.

II

When D entered through doors so colossal it seemed it would take dozens of men to open them, the woman lay on a golden bed gazing at him. Though moonlight and milky fog filled the room, the two of them could see each other as clearly as if they were in broad daylight. The full breasts peeking from the *décolletage* of her crimson dress and the pale legs revealed by its daring slit gave not so much a sense of enticement and flirtation as one of ennui and surpassing loneliness. But that abruptly vanished.

"You've finally come, D," the woman said, eyes gleaming, vitality overflowing from every inch of her body. Love had brought the dead back to life. No matter how futile that love might be.

At the doors, D drew a needle of rough wood from his coat. He didn't harbor so much as a sliver of emotion regarding the woman reflected in his deep, dark eyes.

Her visitor was void even of murderous intent as he came closer, but the woman said to him in what was almost a whisper, "Please tell me one thing."

D halted.

"How did you know of our revival?"

A blue light even stronger than that of D's pendant flowed between the two of them.

"I had a dream," D said.

"A dream?"

"Or maybe it was real. It doesn't matter either way. In the dream, *he* told me. He said he'd brought the island back again."

"And you came to bring destruction, did you not? To destroy everything again. Even me."

D stepped forward.

"It was I who asked the Great One to resurrect the island a moment before my destruction," the woman said. "My husband pierced me through the heart because of my love for you. Such a truly sad thing it is to be reduced to dust all alone. The only person I wanted by my side was nowhere to be found. And his heart wasn't even mine. Even knowing my feelings for you, you thought of me as naught but another opponent to be destroyed. When you succumbed to sunlight syndrome and fell into my husband's hands, I saved your life. And you knew it, too. Yet when I asked you to flee with me, you sent me away without so much as arching an eyebrow. Still, I hid you in a safe place when you couldn't move a muscle, and as a result I tasted my husband's blade. All because I continued to deny him when he asked me your location."

Tears glistened in the eyes of the woman—Duchess Mizuki Dandorian. In the moonlight, they glistened red. They were tears of blood.

"It took a long time from when I was stabbed until I was destroyed," she continued. "My husband stabbed me that way intentionally. I wanted to die, but could not. I wished to see you once again. No matter what death I might meet. But I wanted you to nurse me back to health. And so, when the Great One appeared in the moment before my consciousness was sealed away in the darkness, I thought it a boon from Satan. And I made an entreaty. I asked him to please let me rise again. In order that I might meet you."

Wasn't that just heading down the road to destruction once more? Without a doubt, it was the duchess's love that had brought the island back to life. However, when he'd squared off against the Hunter, her husband had informed his foe that his own resurrection had come from his hatred of D. That which is lost will never return. But someone had bent that rule. Had it been paid for in love, or in hate?

D stood before the bed.

"I'm glad I got to see you," Mizuki said. "My wish has been granted. My second destruction is by your hand."

The duchess closed her eyes. Her expression was one of such happiness it would've driven anyone who saw it mad with envy. It lasted for about a second.

Feeling the resolve that blustered toward her like an unearthly aura, the duchess opened her eyes.

D had turned his back to the Noblewoman and was facing the new arrival who stood at the doors.

"Dearest husband," the duchess said, her voice like that of the dead.

Duke Dandorian's bloodshot eyes bored through D's heart as he said, "So, you've come, as expected. It would appear adulterers have a talent for sniffing out the location of the lady of the house. Oh, have you lost your left hand? Well, tonight I have something special *on hand*!"

Meg was right beside him, and he clamped one hand on her shoulder and shook her before pressing the longsword in his right hand against her throat.

"I don't expect this to have any effect on you," Dandorian continued. "To you, this girl is a complete stranger—nothing more. However, she loves you. As *humans* are wont to do."

Meg shot a quick glance at the duke.

"My wife was a Noble," he said to the Hunter. "To you, she was no more than another to be destroyed. There's no point in blaming my wife for her foolishness. Such are women. But can even you stand idly by and watch as a human lass—one who loves you—is subjected to the fangs of the Nobility?"

"You still don't know?" D replied.

"Know what?"

"All you received was the power to defeat me?"

"It sure looks that way," Meg said.

The duke turned a bewildered look toward the *human* lass.

"Not that it matters either way now," Meg continued, pushing away the blade at her throat.

The look of suspicion in the duke's eye grew stronger. The girl who'd obeyed him like a puppet all the way there had suddenly become a different person. However, he quickly realized the truth.

"Ah . . . So that's what she is. This comes as some surprise," Dandorian confessed. "Well, I have no more use for her, then."

As he said that, Meg arched backward. The duke's blade had gone through her back, piercing her heart. Pulling it from her with one mighty yank, the duke stepped forward.

"The time has come at last."

Dandorian's bandages spread in all directions, trembling like claws about to catch hold of something.

“So long I have waited, D! I shall cut you to pieces in front of the whore who betrayed me out of a mad love for you. D, you cannot win. Not with the power I now possess, and certainly not empty handed.”

The longsword limned a silvery arc as it sped toward D’s neck.

III

D raised his right hand. Sparks sprayed. Blade had bitten into blade.

Meg’s eyes went wide.

D’s right hand gripped a short sword. However, that was only for the second blow. For the first deadly slash, D had moved a fraction of an inch, and that was enough to leave Dandorian’s sword cleaving empty space. Even the swordsmanship of the newly resurrected duke was no match for D.

The duke bounded. His bandages left lengthy trails behind him.

Just as the duke prepared to swipe at him from midair, D, still poised to parry the blow, staggered. The bandages had crept across the ground, wrapped around the Hunter’s legs, and pulled them out from under him.

The Noble’s blade split D’s right shoulder. The bloody spray spurting out momentarily filled both the Hunter’s field of view and that of the duke. In that span, D hurled his short sword at his foe’s location. However, bandages wrapped around it in midair, then discarded the weapon behind the duke.

A stark needle flew. It merely pierced another bandage before hanging in the air uselessly. The bandages flowed to either side of the Nobleman, defending him from D’s attacks as if they possessed a will of their own.

“My fortress of cloth,” the duke laughed. “And you have nothing. Will you try to stop my blade with naught but your right arm?”

The duke charged closer. A bloody grin hung on his lips. His blade swept right, toward D’s neck.

The duke ran. The blade swept.

D leapt back, still tearing bandages.

“You still lack a weapon!”

As the duke regained his posture, he spun himself around in preparation for unleashing another attack. His eyes caught something. A stark gleam of light in D’s hands, flowing right toward him.

The sound of severed vertebrae echoed far and wide, and the duke’s head sailed through the air. Meg gasped. Her shout was overlaid by a cry of pain.

Still poised as it’d been for the throw that’d just put Dandorian’s sword through his wife’s chest, the duke’s torso was split in two lengthwise. That was from D’s second blow.

Taking his eyes from the decapitated body that thudded to the floor, D turned toward the door.

A man in servant garb bowed reverently to him. In his hands he held an empty scabbard. Its contents were in D's hand.

"Zangleson . . . You have my thanks," said the duchess, stained vermilion atop her bed.

When D faced the duke empty handed, she had contacted her faithful servant via communicator and ordered him to bring a longsword that he would then give to D.

Zangleson went over to the duchess and knelt before her.

"So kind of you to see me off, Zangleson," she said in a thread-thin voice that sounded like it could break at any second.

The duchess extended a pale hand to the steward. Clasping it between both of his, Zangleson said, "You honor me."

"Twice I've been destroyed by my husband. However, this time there are two of you to see me off."

Meg wore a look of discontent.

"D, it came to this in the end, as expected," Mizuki continued, lips drained of color forming a smile. "But I was resurrected so I might be destroyed. My wish was granted. Please leave the island within the hour. Zangleson has been ordered to destroy the antiproton reactor. Everything within a six-mile radius of the island will cease to be."

"Thank you."

And saying that, D turned right around.

"D, at the very least . . ." Mizuki said, her hand slowly rising, ". . . take . . ."

The pale hand was turning the purplish hue of rot and corruption.

". . . my hand."

As her hand dropped limply, D gazed at it with a weary expression. Zangleson heaved a long sigh. That alone was their requiem for the Noblewoman who'd twice died for love.

With fog and blue light clinging to him, D started to walk away.

"Not yet, D," the remaining female said to him. "Before you got that sword, it was me that got you out of that trap!"

Meg raised her left hand to shoulder level and turned her palm toward the Hunter. A black eye was staring at D.

"At some point it just ended up on my hand," said the girl, "I don't know when. It seems this eye's absorbed everything about you. Originally it was the duke's, but it was torn from him when he was unaware, too. The person who put it on my hand is the same one who tore it from his!"

"It was *him*?" D said. It was neither a question nor an acknowledgement.

"Since I've got it stuck on me, I've got to fight you. You'll do it,

won't you, D?"

D quietly turned to face Meg.

Could D destroy a second woman who loved him?

It was almost an hour later that one of the Nobility's ships set off from the fog-shrouded bay for the dark, predawn seas. When the ship was exactly ten miles away, the island suddenly vanished. Though the nuclear reaction from protons colliding with antiprotons was extremely small scale, within a six-mile radius the sea was vaporized to that same depth, and the water that rushed into that void caused high seas that plunged the oceans of the world and communities near them into chaos.

It was said that an abnormally small amount of damage was actually suffered thanks to the communication centers closest to the coast having received word of the rough seas to come. Furthermore, that was a miracle, as such a notification was said to be impossible without the use of the Nobility's equipment.

As the ship slid down surges with a sheer thousand-yard drop and slipped between massive whirlpools, D said to the figure at the wheel, "You've had practice at this, haven't you?"

"When we get near land, I'll lower a dinghy," the figure replied. In a woman's voice. "That's where we part company. Thanks for everything."

"It'll be dawn soon."

"There's this island I know, and with this ship I can reach it in three days. If sometime before you die you happen to think back on me, come on by. Whatever island you land on, that's where I'll be."

"Godspeed," said the hoarse voice.

"Same to you."

Lightning split the dark sky, and the wind ripped at waves the size of mountains. And through all that, the ship headed east. In the direction that would soon be colored by the light of dawn.

THE END

Postscript
(from the original Japanese edition)

When you hear of a solitary island, you think there must be "something" there. In the case of the movie *King Kong*, that "something" is dinosaurs; in the L.P. Hartley short story "Podolo" it's a black *bakeneko* cat monster (of sorts); and in the manga "Higanjima," it's vampires. Since the majority of islands belong to someone, when uninformed people (or even informed ones) come ashore on one, we can't really expect things to go well for them. Though it's said there's no longer anywhere on Earth for strange creatures to inhabit, that's clearly a lie. The world still has its *Terra incognita*. And if there weren't such "parts unknown," we'd make some. That's what writers do.

That's why this Vampire Hunter D story has sort of an interesting set-up. As the title suggests, he and the heroine go to an island where—well, you'll just have to read it for yourself. Readers' cries of rage will carry all the way to my house, I imagine. However, for all that, someone more than makes up for it with their efforts. They work so hard, readers are sure to be left speechless, and this person might grab more of the spotlight than D. And there's another angle. What happens when you fall in love with D? Well, I suppose most of you can imagine, but this time . . . In other words, there's a whole lot of D going on. I hope you enjoy it.

What's more, at the end of June, I attended Anime Expo in America with Ms. Takaki, who's handling the Vampire Hunter D comic adaptation. I've never taken part in that sort of event in Japan, so I really can't compare, but I think the fans were very excited. The two signings in particular were so popular they quickly went over the two hundred person limits. In addition to the D series, other books will be published in America, including a possible translation of another big title. And there's also the associated merchandise. I'll talk more about that at a later date. At any rate, three cheers for America!

An August day, 2008

While watching *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932)

Hideyuki Kikuchi

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 26

Bedeviled Stagecoach

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming in Fall 2017 from Dark Horse Books

Along for the Ride

chapter 1

I

Though the midday sunlight on this late autumn day was relatively tranquil for the Frontier as it colored the homes and people, the face of every last person staring at the stagecoach parked in the station lot showed the most horrible loathing. They didn't even make such faces on seeing the evilest villain who was sure to hang. By way of example, it was like the look someone got when they saw a dead body. No, even more horrified—like seeing the living dead.

Though the black coach parked in the lot already had a team of six cyborg horses hitched to it and the folks in the office had finished selling tickets, the travelers were in no hurry to board the cramped vehicle, so they still sat in the break room in the station enjoying cigarettes, consulting maps, or bidding a farewell to the peace and safety of their daily lives.

A commotion rolled down the street. It carried a tinge of horror.

The sheriff's office was only about thirty feet from the station, and beside it was a vacant lot that measured about twenty feet square, but when the door facing that lot opened, what was shoved outside was something all too common on the Frontier. Locked within the ten-foot-by-ten-foot iron cage was a young man dressed in a black servant's outfit, and he was seated on an iron chair that was bolted to the floor.

As the people saw his face, the looks of loathing swiftly faded from their own. It was as if, for the first time in a thousand years, a gust of fresh air was pushing its way through a miasma. Anyone who was there with the spectators would've just sighed and accepted the inevitability of the change. The face of the young captive was that beautiful.

"He's Duke Sinister's valet."

"His name's Dorleac."

"Can you imagine devoting yourself to the Nobility body and soul for more than a decade when you've got a face like that?"

The station quickly became the spot for townspeople to swap information.

"For whatever reason," one woman began, "he was wandering around outside the castle when a security patrol passed by two days back and nabbed him—but aren't they supposed to execute any human who's been with the Nobility that long, whether they've been

bitten or not?"

"It's like this, lady: since there hasn't been a servant of the Nobility who could walk in broad daylight for decades, they got orders directly from the government in the Capital that they really wanted to examine him, and that they were to have him transported."

"Oh, that lucky bastard," the woman remarked.

"Sure is good looking, though, ain't he? You think maybe the muckety-mucks in the Capital used the cameras in their surveillance satellites to sneak a look at his face?"

"Damn near sure of it. You're right on the button. But I don't care how much anyone goes on about him being able to walk in the light of day; he's a servant of the Nobility. No telling what kind of dark power he might have. That goes with the territory for the sheriff and her deputies, but it's a real headache for the other passengers. They'll be risking their lives on this trip. A real ride into hell."

Laughter continued for a little while, but then it stopped as if cut short. A black cage, gleaming in the sunlight, had just passed right in front of the gossip swappers. The cage had small wheels attached to the bottom, and it was pushed by a pair of sheriff's deputies. The sheriff went ahead of the cage, entering the station building—the office of the stagecoach company. When the employees glimpsed her face and the sheriff's badge pinned to her ample chest, their expressions were a sight to see. The sheriff was a beautiful woman with brunette hair spilling from her wide-brimmed hat.

"Well, Louise—I mean, Sheriff, we've got the coach all ready to go," said the man in a suit and bow tie from behind his desk, rising and extending his hand to shake. He was the manager.

"No other passengers but us, right, Mr. Platt?" Sheriff Louise said rather insistently.

The manager shifted his eyes and replied, "I'm sorry, but there are three customers who positively insisted on going."

"Did I or did I not absolutely forbid you from selling any tickets?!" the sheriff snarled, the corners of her eyes rising angrily. Their trip was going to take about a week, during which they would be risking not only their lives but their very souls. They were truly journeying into death.

"Yes, I know you did," the manager replied, "but consider our situation. The trail from here to the airfield runs right through Duke Sinister's domain. Do you think that fiend's just going to sit idly by and let his servant be whisked away right under his nose? Even if you were to return this Dorleac person to him now, we wouldn't be able to run our coaches until his anger subsided. How long do you reckon that'll be? A month? Six? A year? No, let's say half a century at the very least—for fifty years we'll be shit out of luck. This is a serious

impediment to travel. And, it's safe to say, a fatal blow to our business. At this point, we need every last passenger we can get. Hell, we'd sell tickets to monsters, or even the duke himself. The fare to the Capital for ten people puts this company in the black for a month."

The manager's expression and tone were part of a technique he'd mastered during two straight decades running an office for the stagecoach company. Over the last twenty years, everyone who'd ever heard a similar explanation had envisioned the company's imminent bankruptcy, as well as the employees and their families taking their own lives in the aftermath.

The sheriff let out a single sigh and said, "You've explained the situation to your customers, I take it?"

"Of course. And even knowing the danger that awaits, they're all okay with it. I find their courage exemplary."

"I think you're less interested in courage than revenue," the sheriff remarked. After drawing a breath, she continued, "Give me some background on them."

Out of the corner of her eye she glanced over at the lounge. If she could always get this information on short notice, there'd be no need to worry about trouble. Perhaps the sheriff had a hunch about how things would go, because she'd asked the coach service manager to check people's identities despite having told him not to let anyone else ride with them.

"This way," the manager said, leading the sheriff to his private room at the end of the hall where he explained about the passengers.

Claire Scherzen (twenty-seven years old, saloon girl)

Harman Briggs (fifty-one years old, blacksmith)

JJ (thirty-six years old, Hunter of Nobility)

The manager continued, "Added to that is the lunkhead you brought along."

"Al Zemeckis—twenty-one years old, a farmer. And if I ever hear you call him a lunkhead again, there'll be hell to pay. Plus there's me and my two deputies—so, a total of seven, right?"

"And what business brought you to our stagecoach company, Sheriff?" the manager ventured.

Suddenly reminded, Louise corrected herself, saying, "Eight, including Dorleac."

"Our coach, the Belvedere, normally seats twenty, and with the additional fold-down seating can accommodate up to thirty. Yes, you'd be hard pressed to find such a comfortable ride these days."

"That's great to hear—now, could you let everybody onboard?"

The manager looked at the clock on the wall, then compared that to the time on his pocket watch before nodding. "Two minutes and four seconds' difference—and I don't know which of them is correct.

Well, then, you'd best let everyone know."

Without a backward glance at the employee hollering, "Everybody, the coach is heading out!" the sheriff left the office.

Looking over at the stagecoach, Louise found two of her deputies looking back at her, apparently having finished loading the cage onboard. The passengers filed between the two men as they boarded the coach. The saloon girl, the blacksmith, the Hunter—but the fourth one halted and gave the sheriff a look as if he were trying to read her mood.

In a heavy flannel shirt and jeans, the man wore a leather vest in typical farmer fashion. Though his shirt was wrinkled, it'd been well laundered and ironed. He probably had a woman looking out for him. The repeating rifle he carried in his right hand was unusual for a lawman. An ordinary handgun was about a thousand dalas, a bolt-action rifle two thousand, and a repeater more than five thousand. Considering that living expenses out on the Frontier were said to average about a thousand dalas a month, it was a rather extravagant weapon for a farmer to have. Given the age of the rifle, it'd probably been purchased quite some time ago for keeping monsters in line.

"What should I do?" the man asked in the tone of a lost traveler.

You're really not cut out for this work, Al, Louise thought to herself. *I know your situation, but you never should've taken this job.*

"Work with us," the sheriff replied. "You've got to follow my orders to the letter, Al, but everything else I'm leaving to your judgment as a deputy. Raise your right hand."

"Sure."

The farmer raised a heavy right hand, and the sheriff followed suit, saying, "Al Zemeckis, do you swear to discharge your duties as a deputy of the town of Happy Gringo's sheriff's department, western Frontier district, until discharged from that position?"

No matter how many times Louise did this, she never could get used to the ceremony, but she couldn't very well let him onto the coach without deputizing him and releasing him from personal liability.

"I do," the farmer replied, his tone and expression equally serious.

"Good. Climb onboard. For the time being, it's your job to watch our friend the valet."

Following Al, the sheriff was just about to plant a foot on the coach steps when she turned and looked. In addition to the station manager and his staff, nearly a dozen townspeople were staring at her. The looks they gave the stagecoach and its passengers were doleful ones.

Though the sheriff had made no announcements, the speed with which rumors spread in a rustic town was frightening. Someone had

been apprehended near a Noble's castle—with that much to go on, it'd take less than two days to learn who it was and what they'd been doing. No doubt the gossipers could clearly see the purpose of this journey, the hopes of Louise and her men, and a denouement quite at odds with those hopes.

When Louise turned right around, the manager alone made a stiff smile, but he ended up having the door slammed in his face.

Though stagecoach drivers were employees of the coach company, this time one after another had declined the job, so a sheriff's deputy named Lantz who'd had some experience in that field ended up climbing into the driver's seat. A coach employee on the sidewalk rang a tin bell and shouted, "Moving out!" With one crack of the whip, the cyborg horse-drawn coach rolled forward to the sound of creaking wheels. If not for a buffering device, the wheels of the coach would've left ruts in the ground three times as deep.

Even after the coach had faded from sight, those who'd seen it off showed no signs of moving on for the longest time. The sun was high and clouds dotted the blue sky that autumn day—and those people had just watched a stagecoach ride off to a terrible fate.

II

Seating in the coach consisted of five rows of forward-facing benches to either side of a narrow aisle, with each bench seating two passengers. To the aft were shelves for baggage and a space that could hold up to a thousand pounds of cargo—as this type of coach also doubled as a shipping service. Currently, that space was occupied by the prisoner and his iron cage. Al and a deputy named Belbo, the latter armed with a buckshot bow, were sitting on the floor to either side of the cage and well out of arm's reach, while Louise was seated in the very last row. Immediately after boarding the coach, the sheriff and Belbo had donned sunglasses.

As the coach left town and was entering the surrounding farmlands, the sheriff stood up and called out for everyone's attention. All seated separately, the three passengers twisted around for a look. They were in unison in their annoyed expressions. People on the Frontier had a fundamental dislike of authority, after all.

"My name is Louise Kirk, and I'm sheriff of Happy Gringo. Although you're probably already aware of what I'm going to tell you, I must give you fair warning."

Before she'd even finished speaking, all but Harman the blacksmith —who was in the second row from the back on the right-hand side— turned away in disgust.

"From here on out," the sheriff continued, "we're going to be

crossing some extremely dangerous territory. Without a doubt, your lives will be in jeopardy. In such a situation, my three deputies and I will endeavor to do our best to keep all of you safe, but our real mission is transporting the prisoner locked up in back. If there's any concern that rescuing you might jeopardize our mission, we'll have no choice but to give the completion of our mission primary attention. We ask for your understanding in that regard."

"Yeah, we know!" someone promptly responded. It was the saloon girl Claire Scherzen in the second row from the front on the right-hand side. Raising her right hand and the bottle of booze it gripped, she continued, "Normally, you'd die to keep the peace for us. But when the time rolls around, the job comes first—hell, every public official is the same way. Okay, okay. We're used to it by now."

"Another thing—" Louise said, putting strength into her stomach muscles. "In the course of dispatching our duty, there may be some need to restrict your actions. I hope you'll understand."

She was fully prepared for someone to jump down her throat over that.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding!" Claire exploded, and her reaction was natural enough.

Even Harman's mouth went wide as he bellowed, "What exactly's that supposed to mean? First you tell us you'll leave us for dead if the situation calls for it, and now you're asking for our help with your work? Hey, just because you're wearing that badge, don't go thinking that makes you Nobility or something!"

Louise's interest was focused on the third passenger—the man seated in the middle row on the left-hand side. The Hunter. She'd never met him before. He elected to remain silent. That irritated Louise.

"The floor's open for grievances," she said to him. "Something eating you? I'd like to hear about it now."

After the span of a breath, he replied in a gloomy tone, "Not particularly. I wasn't counting on anyone else from the get-go. This is the Frontier."

"You're exactly right," she said, and she was relieved to hear that.

Louise was relatively satisfied with the results. A war of words with drifters could easily escalate into an exchange of bullets or blades. Things had gone pretty well.

"At any rate, we've stated our position. We'd appreciate your cooperation," said the sheriff.

"Like hell I'm helping you," Claire replied spitefully.

All Harman did was spit loudly.

Louise, on the other hand, had a weight off her chest. If she did have to leave the two of them to fend for themselves, now it wouldn't

bother her conscience any. Besides, what she really needed to focus on was what was behind her.

The young man seated on the chair in the cage had a weary look on his face as it was turned toward the floor. Whatever had happened when he was with the Nobility, it seemed that slipping the yoke of fate had left him drained of both strength and will.

However, Louise turned to Al and said sternly, “I thought I gave you a pair of sunglasses yesterday. Put them on.”

“Oh, is it a problem that I haven’t got ’em on yet?” the young farmer asked, frantically reaching for the chest pocket of his shirt.

“They might not seem any different than us, but that’s no reason to underestimate a human who’s lived with the Nobility a long time,” Louise said firmly. “The Nobility took a liking to him. Such being the case, it’d only be natural to want to reward him for his long and loyal service. In his case, that might’ve been by not feeding on him. But what if the reward was magic powers? What if he could pass right through the wall and escape if we took our eyes off him for a minute? We’ve had reports from the northern Frontier of cases where someone turned into mist or bats, just like the legends. Even if it wasn’t something as big as all that, even you must know what happens to people when they look into a Noble’s eyes. There are more cases than you could shake a stick at of people like that turning their own parents over to the Nobility so they could feed.”

“I see. Sorry ’bout that,” Al said, donning the protective charm with stiff, nervous motions.

But there was still someone else who should feel Louise’s wrath.

“Belbo,” she said, “you’re the one with seniority here! What are we supposed to do if you won’t even tell him the basics?”

“Hey, that one was just plain ol’ common sense. Why do I gotta hold his hand for everything?”

“And what’ll you say when he goes and gets possessed?”

The sturdy deputy fell silent.

“How about an answer?”

“Point taken, ma’am.”

If this gig didn’t pay so well and give me the right to push folks around, I’d quit here and now and kill you dead, bitch, before I skipped town, Belbo thought to himself venomously, but he saluted the woman. He thought about giving the shitty little dirt farmer a piece of his mind, but since the prospect of getting chewed out by the sheriff didn’t appeal to him, he decided to hold his tongue.

In a manner of speaking, the servants of the Nobility who were found from time to time could be more trouble to deal with than victims who’d been bitten. Their appearance didn’t differ at all from that of regular people, nor did their daily routine. They could walk

around in the light of day or cross running water without any difficulty. When they ate, they washed their meals down with water. After a year or two of this, even those who had suspicions about them would grow complacent. And the next thing anyone knew, they were using the magic powers their masters had granted them to lead people's wives and daughters off to their employers.

While there were almost no recorded accounts of these magic powers, from the compiled eyewitness accounts they seemed to be a sort of powerful gaze—hypnotism, which was probably the easiest power for the Nobility to grant. In the southern Frontier, when one of these "servants" was found, there were cases of them having both eyes burned out without a moment's discussion, though in many cases it was said the accused was killed before they could say a word in their own defense.

In this case, Dorleac's safety was guaranteed by the fact that the security patrol that captured him happened to be accompanied by a roving reporter from a regional news outlet. His report was delivered at Mach speed by a mutant pigeon, and it took less than two days for the regional news outlet to make the situation clear to the Capital. The Noble Research Committee in the Capital received no more information about the servants than common rumors and the details of their deaths, but another group—in other words, the government—ordered the Autonomous Frontier Government to ensure Dorleac was kept safe and in custody, and requested that he be escorted to the Capital posthaste.

However, there was one factor the Capital didn't comprehend. The Nobility were quite attached to their servants. A renowned poet who traveled the southern Frontier several millennia earlier had declared, "It can be nothing save love." This was juxtaposed with the deluded desires humans who wished to be ageless and indestructible felt toward the Nobility, which were taken up in regional folk songs, ballads, and poems.

The Nobility felt what could only be termed a partiality toward a certain kind of human (though at present the criteria for that had yet to be established). And when Nobles lost such an individual or had one snatched away, their feelings changed to a crazed desire to get them back. Needless to say, their madness included a wish for vengeance on those who'd snatched their favorite.

When the Nobility's power was at its gleaming zenith, it was perfectly normal for the entire hometown of an abductee to be banished to another dimension or targeted for a meteorite strike. Now, even with their hegemony far in decline, it didn't stand to reason that a human stagecoach would be able to pass unharmed through Noble territory immediately after an incident such as this. Especially when

the servant that'd been taken from them was riding in that coach. Nevertheless, while there had been an urgent request from the Capital, it was said the stagecoach had set out mainly due to fears that the Noble—Duke Sinister—might strike against the town of Happy Gringo.

Before noon on the third day, they would reach the relay station and inn in Gasburg, where an escort brigade dispatched by the Capital would join up with them. The brigade was armed with the very latest weapons based on the Nobility's own technology, and they would guide the coach to the town of Canalda, where the airfield was located. Their lives would be on the line for only two days of the journey. That thought was all the stagecoach and its passengers had to cling to as if it were the very hands of God.

"I'm going to go up with Lantz for a while. I'm counting on you guys down here," the sheriff told her deputies about an hour after they'd left town.

Once Louise had mounted the forward staircase and disappeared outside through the hatch, the air in the vehicle seemed much more tranquil.

"Hey, Al, from here on out we'll be in the Nobility's domain. If you don't pull your head outta your ass, you'll be the first one killed!" Belbo teased, as if he'd been waiting for this moment.

When Al ignored him, he just redoubled his efforts, as if that were what anyone would do, saying, "I hear tell you took this gig on account of your wife and kid wanting to buy one of them automatic cleaning machines from the Capital. It's a nice thought, but it ain't gonna do you much good if you lose your life in the bargain. Hell, if something happens, we've gotta be more concerned with protecting this piece of shit than saving our own skins!"

Belbo rapped his heavy bow against the iron bars of the cage. A shrill sound reverberated, and the young man—who'd been looking down at the floor—suddenly raised his head in surprise.

"Oh, did I wake the Noble's precious little page? Okay, you take a good look at my face and my buddy's. Until they cut you up and study you in the Capital, we get to play nursemaid to you. So tell me, did the Nobility feed on you, fucker?"

The air congealed. This was a reasonable enough question on the Frontier—but because of the effect it might have, asking it in front of other people was taboo. A horrible insult, it often escalated into an infringement of human rights that led to blood being spilled—it was said that such cases were on the order of a hundred thousand at the

very least.

"No, I . . . I never . . ." the young man babbled after a while. Though he sounded exhausted, his voice was just as lovely as his face.

"You're trying to tell me you lived with the Nobility for more than a decade, and they didn't do nothing to you? Who'd buy that? Well, you *are* a looker. Bet there's a pretty good chance that instead of blood, they were sucking *something else*."

"Please, just stop," the young man said, shaking his head violently. "I don't want to think about it anymore. I escaped from the duke. I couldn't stand it any longer."

"Sure, that's what all you 'servants' say," Belbo replied with a mocking grin. He'd finally found someone on whom he could take out all his fear, tension, and irritation. "But then, after a couple of years playing it safe, you spring out them fangs you've been hiding once everybody around you lets their guard down. I know what you're plotting, you little bastard!"

Belbo raised his bow. He was going to bang the cage again.

"Don't, Belbo," Al said, getting to his feet. At six foot two, he was pretty much on par with Belbo in the height department, but he looked to weigh about three times as much. His naturally big bones had been sheathed in an armor of muscles through strenuous physical labor.

Belbo found a sole means of escape in his seniority, saying, "What the hell, shit-kicker? You presuming to tell an ol' hand how to do his job?"

"That wasn't my aim. It's just, you're probably gonna rattle the passengers."

"You've got a smart mouth for a goddamn rookie," Belbo said, and he also got to his feet.

There was no turning back now.

But another voice came between them.

III

"Stop screwing around, Deputy. That badge give you the right to bully anyone weaker than you? The other deputy's setting a lot better example than you," Claire said, giving Belbo a sharp look.

"What's that, slut?" Belbo snapped, twice as set on looking tough now that he had a new foe—actually, just an ally for Al. "Who the hell you think's gonna defend the lot of you on this trip when—"

"Earlier, the sheriff said you *wouldn't* be defending us, remember? That sure is a lot of tough talk from a guy who takes orders from a woman."

Belbo fell silent. He was just about to explode. But it was Al who

stopped him.

"Belbo, remember this," the farmer said, tapping a finger against the tin star that gleamed on his own chest.

For a while, Belbo was frozen in place. He knew that no matter what he did, he couldn't win. It felt as if an eternity passed before he let out a sharp little breath, then went back to his original location and sat back down.

"Oh, don't have anything to say now?" Claire said to him, needling him with laughter.

"Knock it off already," Harman the blacksmith told her. "What are we supposed to do when we're not out of town for more than an hour, and already everybody's at each other's throat? We've got two days through Noble territory ahead of us. If we don't cooperate, then everybody who needs saving might not get saved if anything happens. I wanna get where I'm going safe and sound. So do the rest of you, right? If so, let's show a little more consideration for the other folks."

"Yeah, yeah, you're right about that," Claire said, backing down easily. Perhaps it was just her nature to be surprisingly quick to take advantage of a situation.

Al grinned and said, "Thanks, Mr., er—"

"Harman. I'm a blacksmith."

"I'm Al. This is Belbo. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Let's hope we both live to a ripe old age."

The plain-faced blacksmith gave the deputies a little nod, then faced forward again. Pulling a pint bottle of whiskey out of his bag, Harman asked the taciturn passenger across the aisle, "Care for a drink, bud?"

"No, thanks," the man replied, his low voice trembling with absolute refusal.

"Pardon me. So, you a Hunter?" Harman continued, his voice also dropping to a murmur. It wasn't that he was trying to match the other man's tone, but rather that this was another question it was practically forbidden to ask in front of others.

"What makes you think that?" the man replied with unexpected speed.

"Well, in more than fifty years of living, I've run into all types. I can tell from the atmosphere. Just by being there, you make your surroundings sort of quiet—I don't know, like this."

"You mean I give you the creeps?"

Deep in Harman's chest, his ticker thumped hard.

"Ha ha!" the blacksmith said, trying to laugh it off, but apparently the other man wasn't buying it.

"Do I give you the creeps?"

The blacksmith felt as if a tremendous weight were driving him

back against the wall. “No, not at all. Just forget I mentioned it.”

Turning forward, Harman focused his attention on the woman two rows ahead of him, saying, “How about a drink, missy? You’re young, but I bet you can hold your liquor, eh?”

Mindful of those behind him, he took the red bandanna from around his neck and wiped the mouth of the bottle, then leaned forward over one row of seats and reached his arm over a second to offer it to the woman.

“Thanks. Don’t mind if I do,” Claire replied, turning around and reaching back to take the liquor bottle. She clutched her own bottle close to herself.

Taking a swig, she remarked, “This is good stuff. You blacksmiths make pretty good money, do you?”

“Spare me. God might just get so disgusted by that question he’ll shut the gates of Heaven on me. I barely squeak by, but I figure the least I can do is spring for decent booze for myself.”

“You don’t say.”

On seeing the woman down about three mouthfuls with the next swig, Harman bugged his eyes.

“Really can handle your liquor, can’t you? Missy, you wouldn’t happen to be—”

“I work in watering holes. Only I went a little too far and got run out of Happy Gringo. They had the nerve to tell me they’d put me on trial if I wasn’t out of town by the end of today. What’s a dinky little burg like that doing with a public morals committee anyway?” she grumbled, taking another belt from the bottle.

“You said it. I was just thinking the same—”

“You look like a nice, respectable blacksmith, so what are you doing riding this dangerous coach?”

“Just because I’m a blacksmith, that doesn’t mean I’ve got a set residence. See, I’m a traveling smith. It was just time to move on from that town.”

“Really? You know, now that you mention traveling smiths, I hear you guys do more than just make horseshoes and fix farm equipment. I’ve heard talk about iron dolls that can move on their own and wagons that run without engines, but is that stuff really true?” the woman inquired, then took another swig.

“Hey—I mean, yeah, I’ve heard those stories, too, but that stuff’s beyond me. That’s the kind of stuff the Nobility’s gotta teach you.”

“Oh, now that’s disappointing.”

“Sorry. By the way, could I have my—”

“Oh, this? Gee, I’m sorry—I seem to have drank the whole thing, haven’t I?”

“‘Seem to’ my ass! You went and drank the whole thing,” Harman

said, but he managed to rein in his anger. After all, he was the one who'd said they had to work together. Taking the bottle without another word, he held it upside down and sighed sadly.

"This is good booze, but it's pretty strong," he said. "You could light your breath on fire about now. Downing half a bottle of that—you sure your stomach and liver can take it?"

"From the time I was seven, I've been going from bar to bar, so that's twenty years' experience at this. If I couldn't handle it, I'd have checked out of this life a long time ago. God must have a pretty good sense of humor."

Claire's cheeks were flushed, but then they'd been that way when she climbed onboard. And she'd been drinking ever since—more to the point, there hadn't been a single day in the last two decades that she hadn't had a drink. God, have pity on her.

As soon as the sun went down, foot traffic died out in the town of Happy Gringo. Due to being just outside Duke Sinister's domain, the town hadn't suffered any significant damage since its inception, yet fear of the beings who'd ruled over them for ten millennia remained indelibly imprinted not only on the townspeople but on the subconscious of every human being.

Funeral services for the late Fredrick Nahathela had been concluded that day without incident, but his wife Verik's anger only continued to swell. Yes, it certainly could be said that her husband was wrong to get involved with that woman. But if that tramp hadn't been around to begin with, Verik knew her husband wouldn't have had those strange urges and wouldn't have ended up meeting the fate he did.

What a horrible way to die.

Verik had intended to cut the woman in two with a razor-sharp sword from the Nobility that'd been handed down in the family for centuries. She'd been stopped by the woman's employer—the saloon keeper.

When the saloon keeper delivered her husband's lifeless remains, Verik lost her mind and was about to leave the house with the keen blade in one hand, but he told the woman her husband Fredrick had tried to have his way with one of the saloon's employees. He conceded that it was, indeed, terrible the way she'd done it, but his girl had acted in self-defense. Therefore, the widow was asked to let bygones be bygones if the girl left town that very day. What's more, he informed her that her Fredrick had been in the habit of sharing the details of some very unsavory dealings with the girl at his saloon. Were those facts to become public knowledge, Verik and the rest of her family would be the next ones forced to leave town. He mentioned

how people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. And after the saloon keeper gave her a small sampling of the contents of her husband's stories, Verik accepted his deal without further debate.

However, as much as Verik's head could accept it, her heart only burned hotter with malice with each passing minute.

I'll go out to Duke Sinister's castle and offer him my blood in exchange for ripping that girl limb from limb, she thought. *No, I'll have him do it the same way she did my husband, so it takes a good, long time—*

The woman's hate-addled brain clearly made out the sound of footsteps.

Someone's coming down the street in the residential district. A traveler, perhaps? No, the gates would already be closed by now, so they'd have no choice but to wait outside the walls until dawn. And none of the townspeople would be prowling around outside all alone at this hour. Who, then?

Mixed with the footfalls, she could hear voices. Exactly the kind of voices you didn't want to hear at night. Screams. Though her hearing was by no means exceptional, Verik could tell that the cries were coming from the same direction the footsteps had come. So many voices. And such weird screams. They came from behind the footsteps —and were spreading across the town. Anyone and everyone was letting out screams.

What happened?

Clearly it was the work of whoever the footfalls belonged to. But where were those footsteps taking them? If they went clear across town, there was nothing beyond that but Joseph Gashuk's ranch and Stefan Hubuff's fields. No, not them too? Destroying the town and killing everyone—and for what?

A feeling of desperation won out over her fear. Verik ran to the window.

Where were those footsteps?

The door opened. Darkness choked the doorway.

The footsteps were directly in front of her house.

The darkness came inside.

To be continued in

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 26

Bedeviled Stagecoach

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About the Author

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel, *Demon City* (Shinjuku), in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has written numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, working in the tradition of occidental horror writers like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. As of 2004, there are seventeen novels in his hugely popular ongoing Vampire Hunter D series. Many live-action and anime movies of the 1980s and 1990s have been based on Kikuchi's novels.

About the Illustrator

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan. He is well known as a manga and anime artist, and is the famed designer for the Final Fantasy game series. Amano took part in designing characters for many of Tatsunoko Productions' greatest cartoons, including *Gatchaman* (released in the U.S. as *G-Force* and *Battle of the Planets*). Amano became a freelancer at the age of thirty and has collaborated with numerous writers, creating nearly twenty illustrated books that have sold millions of copies. Since the late 1990s Amano has worked with several American comics publishers, including DC Comics on the illustrated Sandman novel *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* with Neil Gaiman, and for Marvel Comics on *Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer* with best-selling author Greg Rucka.